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UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA,  
IRVINE

Changing Border Conditions: Art On The Contemporary Mexico/U.S. Border

THESIS

submitted in partial satisfaction of the requirements  
for the degree of

MASTER OF ARTS

in Art History

by

Endria Leyva Suarez

Thesis Committee:  
Associate Professor Roberta Wue, Chair  
Assistant Professor Abigail Lapin Dardashti  
Professor Leo Chavez

2023



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## **ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS**

Changing Border Conditions: Art On The Contemporary Mexico/U.S. Border

by

Endria Leyva Suarez

Master of Arts in Art History

University of California, Irvine, 2023

Associate Professor Roberta Wue, Chair

The Mexico/U.S. border has undergone a multitude of changes, encompassing both geographical and political transformations. Through an examination of contemporary Mexican, Mexican American, and Chicana art, we gain insight into how the border's evolving conditions have shaped its current climate. The author aims to blend their interest in Chicana/Latina studies with Art History to express the importance of art in the discussion of immigrant legislation in the United States which have real implications for the lives of this community. In the following text, a concise historical overview of immigration patterns across the Mexico/U.S. border showcasing sociopolitical events occurring on both sides of this divide will be discussed to contextualize this complex history. Particular attention will be given to the artistic endeavors of Judith Hernandez, Betsabee Romero, and Hector Dionicio Mendoza. Their respective bodies of work will be analyzed within a historical context, allowing for a chronological exploration of the themes addressed and an investigation into the art materials and processes employed. Giving special importance to the creation and process of these works as they are a visual representation of events and themes that are personally connected to each artist.

## Introduction

Alma Lopez (b.1966) depicts a history of the ever-changing border conditions of the Mexico-U.S. border in her five-part series, *1848: Chicanos and the U.S. Landscape After the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo* (1997). Through the piece, *California Fashion Slave*, Lopez focuses on historical factors that caused the harsh working conditions of migrant women in the United States. A red arrow labeled “Manifest Destiny” comes into frame from the east into a map of the Mexico-U.S. border, pointing at the Virgen De Guadalupe who sits above the date 1848. The vibrancy of the red arrow and 1848 creates a visual focal point that establishes not only this image but the history of the Mexico- U.S. border.

The election of James K. Polk as President in 1844, an obscure democratic politician, was a pivotal moment that fueled the idea of Manifest Destiny, the belief that it was the divine mission of the United States to expand westward and spread American ideals and institutions. This ideological stance was a driving force behind the Mexican-American War and the acquisition of the Oregon territory and California. The year 1848 refers to the Treaty Of Hidalgo that ended the Mexican American war, a war provoked by President Polk and the idea of U.S. western expansion as Manifest Destiny. Establishing political boundaries and recognizing the rights of Mexican Americans to their property, language, and culture, albeit with limitations.



This Treaty effectively created the modern day geo-political divide between the two nations. With a newly established border the immigration culture changed from a passive act to a dangerous and difficult life decision. It is crucial to comprehend that this transformative shift did not occur instantaneously. Rather, it was not until later in the 20th century that border protection measures and immigration laws were implemented. By the mid-1920s, immigration became categorized as an illegal activity within the United States.

Throughout her work, Lopez illustrates how circumstances at the border impact the lives of marginalized communities who are attempting to cross it. Lopez showcases images of border patrol chasing a migrant and the working conditions of women in regions such as Los Angeles' fashion district, displaying a history of how the political border creates oppression and discrimination. The women depicted in a ghostly manner take up the center of the image with the Los Angeles skyline as their backdrop, a transparent group of people whose labor allowed for the development of such cities. Mexican labor throughout the 1920s allowed for the fast development of such cities such as Los Angeles, San Diego, and San Francisco, to name a few.<sup>1</sup>

Lopez depicts the effects of Manifest Destiny while simultaneously creating a visual counter to the 1872 *American Progress* painting by John Gast. With the ghostly images of women in the skyline of Los Angeles the piece depicts a multitude of imagery from the women's labor force in the garments district of Los Angeles during the 1990s, the hostile conditions endured by border crossers and the historical implication of the Treaty of Hidalgo.

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<sup>1</sup>Mae M. Ngai, "*Impossible Subjects: Illegal Aliens and the Making of Modern America.*" Princeton: Princeton University Press. 2004. pp. 56-90.

Thus, the collage features a map of the Mexico-U.S. border, encompassing various fragments representing the diverse elements of working and living in the U.S. as an immigrant. The process and technique employed in creating this artwork through collage evoke a strong desire to reconstruct a genuine portrayal of the historical narrative. Within this composition, we can visualize the distinct Los Angeles landscape, devoid of overlapping images, offering a different narrative—a depiction of a city constructed by immigrant labor, yet still reliant on this labor. Isolating each component of the collage would yield similar outcomes: an incomplete story, lacking contextual details, resulting in a diminished emotional response and understanding of the overarching narrative intended by Lopez. Consequently, this image holds significant relevance within the broader context of this text, serving as an establishing image. Through its collage technique, it merges themes encompassing border history, the prominent role of women in labor, memory, and the physical conditions prevalent at the Mexico-U.S. border.

### Mexico/U.S. Border History

Within the context of a historical framework, it is important to briefly discuss significant events and legislations that have shaped the Mexico/U.S. border, particularly concerning immigration and the lives of migrants. This section aims to provide a concise overview, rather than an exhaustive history of the constantly evolving border. Despite the complexities and nuances of this history, a glimpse into key events spanning decades will enable us to engage in a deeper discussion of the border through the perspectives of diverse artists who have various connections to this geographic divide.

During the early 20th century, a wave of Mexican immigrants migrated to the United States, primarily as agricultural laborers in states like California. Many others settled in

metropolitan cities such as Chicago, Illinois, working in steel mills, as they sought refuge from the turmoil caused by the Mexican Revolution. However, the Great Depression of the 1930s led to mass deportations of Mexican and Mexican American citizens. Rough estimates suggest that between 355,000 and 2 million people were repatriated to Mexico.<sup>2</sup> President Herbert Hoover authorized these deportations, aiming to create job opportunities for financially struggling Americans affected by the Great Depression. It is estimated that around forty to sixty percent of those deported were U.S. citizens, many of whom were children of undocumented Mexican immigrants.<sup>3</sup> The repatriation efforts received significant support from city, state, and federal governments. Simultaneously, voluntary repatriation was prevalent, with the economic collapse prompting many individuals to return to Mexico in order to escape financial hardships.

In the early 1940s, the Braceros Program was initiated in California. This program, designed by the State Department of Labor in conjunction with the Naturalization Service from the Department of Justice, provided Mexican laborers with a type of work visa for employment in the United States.<sup>4</sup> The program included promises of adequate living conditions in labor camps, access to food, minimum wage, and protection against discrimination. Stockton, California, was among the first cities to accept laborers in 1942, typically recruiting younger, physically fit men. The Braceros Program was established to address the labor shortage during World War II, shortly after the war commenced, the United States allowed for the return or first-time legal entry of individuals for labor purposes. Although only around ten percent of the U.S. workforce participated in the program during its initial five years, it continued for over two

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<sup>2</sup>Lawrence A. Cardoso. "*Mexican Emigration to the United States, 1897-1931*". University of Arizona Press. 1980. p.p. 144-153.

<sup>3</sup>Brian Gratton; Emily Merchant. "*Immigration, Repatriation, and Deportation: The Mexican-Origin Population in the United States, 1920-1950.*" Vol. 47, no. 4. The International migration review. pp. 944–975. 2013.

<sup>4</sup>Calavita, Kitty. "*Inside the State: The Bracero Program, Immigration, and the I. N. S.*" New York: Quid Pro, LLC. 1992.

decades, enabling approximately five million individuals to work, making it the largest labor program in U.S. history.<sup>5</sup>

The U.S. Border Patrol originated as an agency established through the enactment of the National Origins Act of 1924, an immigration law that established a system of national quotas on the number of immigrants permitted entry into the United States.<sup>6</sup> Its primary objective was to exclude Asian immigrants attempting to cross the Mexico/U.S. border. Over the years, the U.S.<sup>7</sup> Border Patrol has adapted its priorities, while maintaining its original mission of deterring, detecting, and apprehending undocumented immigrants from various countries. Notably, following the September 11, 2001 attacks, the U.S. Border Patrol became part of the Department of Homeland Security.

However, the militarization of the Mexico/U.S. border began in previous decades, during the administrations of Ronald Reagan and Bill Clinton. The Immigration Reform and Control Act of 1986 not only allowed undocumented immigrants to be eligible for legal status but also facilitated the introduction of new surveillance technology, increased funding for the U.S. Border Patrol, and imposed penalties on businesses that knowingly hired undocumented immigrants. During the Clinton administration in 1994, U.S. Attorney General Janet Reno introduced Operation Gatekeeper with the objective of ensuring the San Ysidro port of entry remained free from unlawful entry. As a consequence, migration traffic was redirected towards more challenging terrains in the eastern deserts of California and neighboring states. The subsequent

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<sup>5</sup> Gamboa, Erasmo. *“Bracero Railroaders: The Forgotten World War II Story of Mexican Workers in the U.S. West.”* University of Washington Press. 2016

<sup>6</sup> "Border Patrol History". U.S. Customs and Border Protection. April 3, 2014. Archived from the original on October 22, 2020. Accessed Jan, 2023.

<sup>7</sup> Vila, Pablo., Eduardo Barrera. *“Aliens in Heterotopia: An Intertextual Reading of the Border Patrol Museum.”* in *Ethnography at the Border*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2003.

phase of this initiative aimed to further enhance border security through the adoption of new technologies, including a biometrical identification system to accurately identify undocumented immigrants crossing the border.<sup>8</sup> Noted academic and author Noam Chomsky suggests that the Clinton administration anticipated an increase in immigration to the U.S. as a result of the implementation of the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) in the same year as Operation Gatekeeper.<sup>9</sup> NAFTA, a trade agreement involving Canada, the United States, and Mexico, had unintended consequences, displacing and undermining labor and agricultural workers in Mexico. Consequently, a considerable number of individuals sought employment opportunities in the United States. It is noteworthy that the people migrating from Mexico were no longer solely men, but also included entire family units.

This section provides a concise overview of significant events and legislations that have shaped the Mexico/U.S. border within a historical context, focusing on immigration and the lives of migrants. While discussing these events, it becomes apparent that legislation has not only impacted migration patterns and border control, but has also inadvertently contributed to a sense of anonymity among individuals who must continuously hide themselves and assimilate into the faceless masses of migrants in the United States.

In the following sections I will examine the work of three artists who explore themes of immigration, identity, and anonymity. First, the artist Judith Hernandez (b. 1948), a first-generation Chicana with Mexican immigrant parents, investigates the impacts of NAFTA on working women in the border region. Second, the work of Betsabee Romero (b. 1963), a Mexican national residing in Mexico City, offers a unique perspective on migration from the

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<sup>8</sup> Rios, Pedro. “*Perspective: For 25 Years, Operation Gatekeeper Has Made Life Worse for Border Communities.*” The Washington Post, October 1, 2019.

<sup>9</sup> Chomsky, Noam. “*Making the Future – Occupations, Interventions, Empire and Resistance.*” San Francisco: City Lights Books. 2013. p.23

standpoint of someone who has not personally experienced emigration from their home country. Finally, Hector Dionicio Mendoza (b. 1969), a Mexican immigrant whose artwork provides insights into the journey of a border crosser while also offering a reflective glimpse into his personal history.

The artistic endeavors of these three artists provide a unique opportunity to delve into various mediums, processes, and techniques that collectively contribute to depicting a comprehensive narrative and offering intimate insights into the conditions at the border and the individuals impacted by them. Through their work, a rich tapestry of history and personal experiences unfolds, enabling a deeper understanding of the complexities surrounding the border.

#### Judith Hernandez: Face To Face

From beauty to horror, Judith Hernandez's installation piece, *Juarez Tzompantli*, from the 2011 exhibition at the National Museum Of Mexican Art depicts six heads atop the wooden poles of a fence. The faces are a series of white masks made out of paper mache being both unrecognizable yet demanding to finally be seen. Placed in the center of the gallery in a standalone installation, their stature allows them to take up space, to be recognized and interact with the audience. Hernandez is demanding her audience come face to face with the horrible history of Ciudad Juarez Femicide almost thirty years earlier.

Hernandez began the Juarez series in 2007 after learning about the 1990s femicide in the city of Juarez, Mexico in an effort to raise awareness about these events. The mass murders of young women in this bordertown was widely underreported.

There was a lack of importance given to this demographic of women, most of whom were factory workers in Juarez. Almost 30 years after these horrific events there has been little to no resolution of these horrific events.<sup>10</sup> However, an introspective look at history allows us to create hypotheses as to why a femicide at this level was allowed to occur. Factors such as the NAFTA agreement, the power of the cartels and traditional gender norms, all work together to cover up such events. After 1994 the NAFTA agreement created a new dynamic within the Mexico U.S. border, changing its conditions both on the border itself and on the Mexico side. There was a surge in reported deaths among those who attempted to cross, as well as in labor industries in Mexico. Labor, one of the main reasons for migrating to the U.S was impacted by the NAFTA agreement and a higher number of people began to cross this border. It is also important to note that the statistics provided by the U.S. Customs and Border Project may not be actual as the recording and reporting of migrant deaths have not been comprehensive. The NAFTA agreement meant a higher import of cheap American goods such as agricultural foods leading people to migrate in search of better jobs when their family farms were no longer able to compete with lower priced imports. Through the history of the Mexico/U.S. border this has been the conventional reason for migration especially amongst men leaving their homes in search of labor to then send money back to their families. However, the NAFTA agreement now was no longer just affecting male dominated labor spaces, causing women to take up jobs in American run factories such as those in Ciudad Juarez. Heightening the female labor force in such industries allowed for a vulnerable population, working class women, coupled with the patriarchal standards of gender norms giving little to no importance to women, specifically women in this demographic. More than 370 women were killed within the years following the NAFTA

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<sup>10</sup> Kathleen Staudt. “*Violence Against Women at the Border: unpacking institutions.*” In *Human Rights Along the U.S.–Mexico Border*, 107–. University of Arizona Press, 2022.

agreement resulting in little to no response from police or government officials, creating a sentiment of indifference to the crimes. Failure to properly report and investigate these murders, caused the death tolls to rise with no consequences.

Upon close observation of this installation piece, one can discern small pieces of red ribbon intricately tied through the wire, cleverly mimicking the appearance of barbed wire spikes. This red ribbon is a signature feature of Hernandez's oeuvre, commonly utilized in her works that explore themes of death and violence. In both this installation and her other works, the red ribbon serves as a powerful symbol of danger, representing both a physical and metaphorical threat. The wire that is placed across the series of poles in this installation might initially seem like a simple fence, creating a physical boundary between two spaces. However, the use of the red ribbon transforms this fence into something far more hostile, a barrier intended to harm anyone or anything that attempts to cross it. Through this artistic intervention, Hernandez skillfully subverts the viewer's expectations, exposing the underlying violence and danger that exist within the border.

In the works of Hernandez, the motif of the red ribbon appears frequently, often featuring prominently in her depictions of masked women. However, in this particular installation, the masks themselves take center stage as independent objects, disconnected from any physical body. Rather than being worn by a woman, they are instead rendered as copies of a face that is printed on poles arranged to form a fence. In some cases, the mask is only discernible by the stitching that outlines its perimeter, while in other works, such as the luchadora's mask, its identity as a disguise is unmistakable. These masks serve as a powerful symbol of the countless anonymous women who have been murdered over the years in Juarez, a border town where their deaths have gone largely unnoticed. The masks, with their featureless white facade, represent not



only the anonymity of these women but also the lack of recognition they have received in death. Without even a body or face behind the mask, their existence has been rendered impersonal, allowing their murders to continue. The use of masks in Hernandez's work therefore serves as a painful commentary on the systemic violence and oppression faced by women.

This artwork consists of six masks, with only one adorned with fully grown antlers, symbolizing the concept of being hunted. The women who inspired this piece have been historically hunted like animals, and have been made to feel disposable. The image of a taxidermied deer mounted as a trophy above a fireplace serves as a metaphor for the treatment of women in society. The deer has also held a symbolic significance as a representation of spirituality and regeneration in various cultures throughout history. The artist created these masks with the help of her friend, a Mexican national with indigenous features, who served as the model for the plaster mold used in the creation of the series.<sup>11</sup> While perfection was not the primary goal, the artist sought to create masks that could be recognized as representing a human face.

This artist sees herself as a storyteller, sharing stories driven by social and political subject matter. She uses aesthetics such as color and scale to engage her audience and capture their attention in the brief moment she has to do so.<sup>12</sup> She provides her audience with a summary or snapshot of the history she is presenting, with the aim of generating interest in the subjects she discusses. In this particular case, she hopes to draw attention to the Juarez Femicide by offering viewers a direct and personal confrontation with the issue, with the ultimate goal of preventing such atrocities from recurring

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<sup>11</sup> “*Judithe Hernández Returns to Los Angeles, to Her Roots, Still Determined to Affect Change.*” YouTube. YouTube, November 29, 2017.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

Artist Hernandez's early influences were rooted in her mother's belief in the importance of presenting oneself professionally. She often wore clothing bearing paint splatters and other stains as she devoted her time to the creative process. However, as her artwork increasingly tackled violent subject matter, Hernandez began to consider the importance of presentation in her work. Her mother's advice then took on a new level of significance, prompting her to experiment with an aesthetic characterized by powerful color schemes and composition that conveyed beauty despite the challenging themes she explored. Hernandez's approach aimed to draw viewers into her pieces by capturing their attention with striking visual elements, and then engaging them with the intricate details of her work. Ultimately, her art is intended to raise awareness of histories of violence against women and inspire action to prevent their repetition.

In this 2011 exhibition, the installation is the first thing visitors see upon entering the gallery. A standalone white wall serves as a backdrop for an especially crafted installation for the show. As visitors make their way around the wall, they are met with a deep aubergine-colored wall and a series of pastels on paper depicting 14 pieces from the *Weight of Silence* series. This collection features close-up images of women's heads with a prominent red hand obscuring each face, creating a mugshot-like effect that prevents easy identification.

Lighting played a vital role in the exhibition. Focusing the light on the installation, the white wall created shadows, allowing for a seamless silhouette of the masks, antlers, pole, and barbed wire. The installation aimed to highlight the duality of a physical representation of the femicide and an obscured perception of reality. The artwork was grounded by a field of black lilies, with a single white lily representing the identified victims, which were just a fraction of the total number of women who fell victim to the femicide. The single white lily represents the

youngest victims, symbolizing a sense of purity. Overall, Hernandez's artwork aims to bring to light the difficult topics of violence against women, inspire awareness and change, and offer viewers a space to confront and consider these challenging narratives.

### Betsabee Romero: Slowing Down

Romero's artwork delves into the imagery of immigration road signs, reclaiming them and contextualizing them with cultural and historical background. Before exploring the depth of her artistic expression, it is important to understand the history behind these signs. Depicting a silhouette family in running motion, a male figure leading a woman and child on a bright yellow background with a label simply stating CAUTION. In 1990, the California Department of Transportation (Caltrans) crafted these signs, replacing a previous one that simply read, "Caution Watch for People Crossing Road," as to more quickly invoke a warning to oncoming traffic. Tragically, the period from 1987 to 1990 witnessed the loss of over one hundred lives along the road. During this particular period, coyotes or border crossing guides had developed a habit of guiding individuals to run across the Interstate 5 freeway, whereby they would later be picked up either in the median or on the shoulders of the freeway to complete the final stretch of their journey.

As one of the nation's largest freeways, Interstate 5 has an astonishing 22 lanes in certain sections of San Diego, making it an especially dangerous area to traverse on foot. Nonetheless, the number of migrant fatalities resulting from crossings at the San Ysidro entry port pales in comparison to the response from Border Patrol initiatives, which sought to redirect individuals to even more hazardous locations to the east, characterized by Prevention Through Deterrence.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> De León, Jason. *The Land of Open Graves : Living and Dying on the Migrant Trail.* Oakland, California: University of California Press, 2015. pp.1-22.

Originally implemented as a temporary solution, these road signs were eventually replaced in 1994 by Operation Gatekeeper and Prevention Through Deterrence as measures that sought to militarize the border.

Over the years these signs became obsolete with the last of these signs remaining in place until 2018 due to a 95% decline in migrant crossings through this particular region since 1986. However, the impact of Operation Gatekeeper cannot be underestimated, particularly in conjunction with NAFTA. Both Operation Gatekeeper and NAFTA had far-reaching consequences, undermining Mexican agricultural businesses, inadvertently pushing an influx of immigrants towards the United States. Consequently, these events allowed for the militarization of the border. The interplay between policy decisions and their societal repercussions underscores the complex backdrop against which Romero's artwork emerges.

Through her artistic lens, Romero challenges conventional perspectives and invites viewers to confront the multifaceted dimensions of these road signs and the environment around it.<sup>14</sup> Her work serves as a reminder of the historical narratives intertwined with immigration, policy, and human experiences. By recontextualizing the signs, Romero draws attention to the underlying stories and amplifies the call for a nuanced understanding of the broader issues at hand.

Car tires, an integral element of mobility and migration, have played a significant role in human history. From small towns to across countries, the shared experience of moving and relocating has always been inherent in our collective existence. The phenomenon of mobility is a multifaceted and intricate concept that simultaneously enriches and complicates our lives.

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<sup>14</sup> Patron. "*Betsabeé Romero Unveils an Altar in Their Memory / Un Altar En Su Memoria.*" Patron Magazine, April 13, 2020.

The tire and its relationship with automobiles have become a central motif in Romero's research and art practice. From 2018 to 2020, The National Museum of Women in the Arts showcased an exhibition of Romero's works titled *Signals Of A Long Road Together* as part of their public art exhibitions. Within this context, I will focus on one particular sculpture entitled *Huellas y Cicatricez (Traces and Scars)*, which serves as a foundation for understanding Romero's artistic and political engagement with the impact of immigration on individuals' lives. Situated outside the museum, this artwork encourages viewers to pause and engage more deeply with their surroundings.

*Huellas y Cicatricez* consists of four vehicle tires stacked vertically and suspended between two poles by metal wires. These tires serve as the canvas upon which Romero presents her artwork. Carved onto the sides of the tires are motifs depicting families running, reminiscent of the caution road signs near the Mexico/U.S. border. Romero portrays these families using a color composition that contrasts with the original road signs. While the signs feature a black silhouette against a yellow background, Romero colors gold the family against a black backdrop. Surrounding the entire tire, a repeated motif of flowers separates each passing family.

As an artist residing and working in Mexico, Romero's artwork provides insights into the perspective of a Mexican national observing the impact of immigration on her community from within their home country. She recognizes that immigration is not solely a political or safety concern, nor is it limited to the border region. Rather, it is a humanitarian issue that affects not only those directly residing near the physical border but also individuals on both sides of the divide. Romero's work reflects a profound sense of humanity and empathy, realizing that members of her community choose to embark on such a journey filled with numerous challenges. Through her representations of immigration and broader concerns such as the

environment, Romero encourages us to slow down and attentively observe the nuances and areas in need of transformation.

While cars have reached the pinnacle of utility, providing immense convenience to humanity, they have also become a major source of pollution, waste, fragility, and accidents. The rapid pace of modernity, characterized by its relentless velocity, has led to a dearth of opportunities to slow down and appreciate the world around us. Within her artistic process, she transforms fleeting moments into tangible objects. She transforms these objects powered by gasoline and motors to manual movement, by taking each tire and moving them by hand back and forth, driven solely by her determination to contemplate their histories, the swiftness with which they once traveled, and the potential encounters they may have had with various forms of life, ranging from insects to animals, and even humans.

Moreover, tires also assume the role of memory tools, as they possess an inherent difficulty in decomposing and recycling. The rate at which tires are produced far exceeds the capacity for their proper disposal. This disjunction between production and recycling rates raises questions about the tire's significance, positioning it as a potent symbol of memory rather than merely a means of transportation. The aspect of the tire that maintains constant physical contact with the ground exhibits a similar carved style adorned with gilded colors. However, Romero has taken these carvings a step further by deepening them, occasionally even puncturing the tire entirely, thus generating motifs within the negative space. Additionally, concealed within the tires, a strip of blue lights emanates, creating an illuminating effect. The intricate carving technique employed by Romero alludes to pre-Columbian motifs, establishing a connection to ancestral roots and cultural representations. Through the depiction of these motifs, Romero

endeavors to engage in a dialogue with the past, offering us insights into the historical narrative of the community.

In certain contexts, there has been a misguided belief that Mesoamerican and Pre-Columbian cultures lacked sophistication or technological advancement due to their limited use of wheels. However, this assertion is fundamentally flawed, as these cultures employed wheels in various ways. For instance, they utilized them as printmaking tools, employing them as a medium for storytelling and the preservation of collective memory. Through her work, Romero argues that the tire's significance extends beyond its functional purpose of movement. Instead, it serves as a conduit for memory, a tangible link to our past and a testament to the complex interplay between culture, technology, and human experience.

#### Hector Dionicio Mendoza: Reminiscing

Adorning the walls of the Orange County Museum of Art is a larger-than-life animal, serving as a symbol of the difficult journey undertaken by women who cross the Mexico-U.S. border. This remarkable sculpture is divided along the horizon, featuring a half-human, half-animal figure titled *Coyota* (2020). The animal form is fashioned from cardboard, while the human part is adorned in a foliage print. The dynamic figure of the coyota is captured in motion, with the creature depicted crouching down and moving slowly, representing the treacherous terrain between Mexico and the United States. The entire body of the creature is mounted onto the wall, with only the head protruding forward in a vigilant stance. The sculpture evokes a sense of heightened awareness, both of the surroundings and of oneself, with the delicate positioning of the creature's legs on the ground. The hind legs of the coyota are squatting down to minimize its

spatial footprint, and the tips of its toes touch the ground, highlighting the delicate balance and unpredictable nature of the journey. One hand is firmly placed on the ground, while the other hesitates, suggesting a sense of uncertainty and caution. As the leader of the pack, the coyota symbolizes the strength and resilience of women in crossing the border, with a line of people following closely behind on their journey.

The Trump administration, which began with his presidential campaign in 2015 and ended in 2020, was marked by a series of overlapping crises, including a global pandemic, economic recession, and civil unrest. Against this backdrop, artist Hector Dionico Mendoza took the opportunity to reflect on recent history and his personal experiences. During the Trump administration, a normalization of white supremacy and legitimization of bigotry in mainstream politics became apparent. As President of the United States, Trump set a standard that fostered hostility towards individuals who did not conform to the demographic of cis white straight males. Notably, Trump's anti-immigration policies and inhumane treatment of those seeking asylum at the Mexico-U.S. border gained popularity during his campaign. Through his artistic expressions, Mendoza reflects on the mistreatment of marginalized communities offering an opportunity to reflect on the socio-political climate of this era and to consider the impact of such policies on individuals and communities, while also taking into account the personal experiences that shaped him as a person and an artist.

The use of accessible materials, such as cardboard, has played a crucial role in the artistic practice of Mendoza. This material allows him the opportunity to create regardless of his location, without the concern for cost or transporting tools. In many of his works, Mendoza employs found materials, and in the case of the sculpture *Coyota*, he has manipulated cardboard to form the animal half of the hybrid creature. Mendoza's process involves a variety of



techniques, including cutting, ripping, fraying, gluing, and layering, which yield an rich texture in the final piece. The versatility of cardboard as a medium allows for diverse manipulation, but also serves as a symbol of its varied utilitarian uses. This material evokes memories of Mendoza's personal history, as it was used to pack produce during his family's migration from Michoacan, Mexico to the farm town of King City. Looking back at his early days in this country, cardboard was the primary mode of transporting their physical belongings for him and his family, allowing them to carry only a limited number of items in a box wrapped with rope. In *Coyota*, cardboard represents mobility and the means of transporting lives for the sake of labor. As a young boy, Mendoza worked in the agricultural industry alongside his family, gaining an appreciation for the demanding physical labor. He was paid by the bucket to fill cardboard boxes with tomatoes, which served as his first job. Mendoza's experience with cardboard as a readily available material has allowed him to create works of art without concern for costly materials, and he believes that all artists should have access to affordable materials. Thus, cardboard has served not only as a material for Mendoza's artistic expression, but also as a symbol of his migrant past and his present as an artist. The material represents the accessibility and versatility that is fundamental to his artistic practice.

This artwork presents a captivating illusion of a human figure putting on a coyota cardboard costume, featuring a foliage pattern that creates a ghostly imprint of the human body. The artwork is set against a black background, and the staggered brown foliage fills it with depth and an atmosphere of being deeply immersed in a wilderness environment. The color of the foliage allows it to blend seamlessly with the cardboard from the coyota above, creating an effective visual balance.

The technical process of printing the foliage with slight transparency yields a similar effect to an x-ray photograph. This creates an implication that the foliage is an integral part of the figure, serving as a critical network for the creature's function. The foliage pattern is a recurrent theme in the artist Mendoza's body of work, originating as a form of reminiscing on his family history during a period of isolation. While attending an artist in residence program at the Montalvo Art Center, Mendoza noticed the lack of diversity and representation of Latino and other artists of color, prompting him to make efforts to change the admission process of the program. This experience led him to explore the nature of northern California by spending time alone in the Saratoga mountains, where he reflected on his family's history and his grandfather's influence on his interest in ethno-botany.

Mendoza's grandfather practiced Yoruba, a form of medical herbalism, and served as the shaman and healer in their town, passing on the discipline to the next generation. However, Mendoza's father was not interested in *curanderismo*, leading the family to migrate to the United States in search of better economic opportunities. The artist began incorporating the foliage pattern into his work only after his experience in the Saratoga mountains. He picked up flowers and leaves during his walks in the wilderness, pressing them between books and later using them as stencils to spray paint and leave an impression of the plant.<sup>15</sup> Mendoza has successfully carried on his grandfather's practice of Yoruba through his art, utilizing plants to depict healing within his work.

“Coyota” is a term used to describe the female counterpart of the male “Coyote,” a colloquial term used to refer to those who engage in the smuggling of immigrants across the Mexico-U.S border. This is a job commonly carried out by men who live in close proximity to

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<sup>15</sup> Mendoza, Hector Dionicio. “Coyota: Student Interview.” Interviewed by Endria Leyva Suarez. Feb 7, 2023

the border and possess extensive knowledge of the terrain. The coyota in question here represents what is known as a "border coyote," someone who physically guides individuals across the border, traversing back and forth between both nations with apparent ease. To be successful in this line of work, the coyota must not only be familiar with the terrain but must also possess social capital in the form of connection and trust. Developing a positive reputation within migrant communities is crucial to the success of a coyota in this competitive market, as their achievements are primarily known by word-of-mouth among social networks both in the US and in Mexico or other communities of migrants. However, this lucrative job comes at a great cost, with coyotas putting themselves in significant danger both physically and legally. The compensation for this work ranges between \$1500-\$2500 per person, earning an estimated \$800,000 a year. People end up doing this line of work for various reasons, mainly the necessity for money, but also as way to more lucrative jobs such as drug smuggling and human trafficking. It's important to note that this is not the case for every coyota. In the case of Mendoza's aunts, who this piece is inspired by, this work is not seen as a shameful or lucrative business but rather as a source of empowerment.

As successful coyotas, Mendoza's aunts took great pride in ensuring the safety and wellbeing of the migrants they guided across the border, particularly women and children who were particularly vulnerable during this journey. For them, running a business where these groups could feel safe as they crossed these hostile terrains was not only a source of personal fulfillment but also a vehicle for helping families find a better future or reunite with loved ones. The perspective of the coyota is often not heard, as anonymity is a vital aspect of their job. Keeping their identity hidden is what allows them to continue their work while also protecting themselves and their families. Both parties rely heavily on trust, yet simultaneously maintain a

vigilance in revealing more than what is necessary to maintain anonymity in the name of survival. This creates a powerful juxtaposition of trust and lack thereof between the two parties.

*Buscando Futuro / Finding Future* (2020) showcases the humanity behind those who are crossing the border as well as serving as a conversation with the piece *Coyota*. At first glance these two pieces are made up of similar techniques and materiality. This work depicts an ambiguous gender figure made of cardboard frozen in time as they take a step forward. The only discernable piece of clothing on their body is a hoodie over the head whose drawstrings are pulled to hide most of the face. The figure is also wearing a backpack on their back, however this backpack is serving as a shelter for a small child who hides inside of it. The bottom part of the backpack has been cut out to allow the child who is being buried on the figure's back to hide the top half of their body in it. As previously examined, Mendoza's use of cardboard has a deeper significance, becoming a symbol of mobility. The use of cardboard in *Buscando Futuro / Finding Future* continues this idea of mobility and migration, seen in the top half of the adult figure, and the bottom half of the child figure creating a complete figure supporting each other. The hands and arms of the adult figure interacts with the legs of the child that are fashioned out of cardboard. Having these materials in different sections of the piece interact with each other creates a sense of oneness, similarity, and familiarity between these figures. Similarly, the use of cardboard in *Coyota* creates a familiarity between those who are crossing the border to begin a new life in the other side, and those who are guiding the journey. The cardboard functions as a way to connect these figures to each other, to the common goal of mobility in search of making income for their families to live a better life. Although the piece *Coyota* figure is a depiction of a morphed half human half animal figure, the context of this piece allows for a further sense of humanizing the border smugglers and crossers. Being made out of the same materials and similar

decorative pattern humanizes the experience of both of these parties, as well as uniting them in a shared goal.

Mendoza incorporates a unique mixed media in the composition of *Buscando Futuro / Finding Future*, utilizing solid wood and cinder blocks as the figure's leg. It is important to make a distinction between the two legs, the leg that is pushing off the ground is made out of a thin and flat material that allows for the similar foliage pattern seen in *Coyota* to be painted on. Continuing the similar notion of the pattern representing the past, the familiar, a place of comfort. As previously mentioned with *Coyota*, this pattern was developed from the artist's memories of his grandfather back in Mexico, within this context the foliage is a representation of what is being left behind. The positioning of the legs dictate the story of wanting to move forward, still touching ground with the hind leg but cementing a future with the front leg. This cementing becomes literal with the use of cinder block as the foot and bottom half of the leg and a wooden block for the top half. Creating a sturdy step forward, determined to have a permanent place in this new location.

Imagining that this pair is crossing the Mexico/U.S. border this is the moment in which that the shift happens, from one country into the other. Noting that that shift is not one of simulation rather a new way of life. The hind leg does not leave the Mexican side of the border, it will continue to have roots from the home country, with adornments in the body that will not fade the moment that leg shifts positions. While the front leg will remain as a reminder of the possibility of mobility, however, keeping in mind that this journey is not an easy one, it is heavy, it is challenging to pick up everything you know, everything you are familiar with to make this journey. In an artist talk at Mount Holyoke College, Mendoza spoke about this work, explaining

that this material used for the front leg was inspired by the cheap labor that the immigrant community is thrown into when migrating to the United States.<sup>16</sup>

Through the conversation with Chicana/Latina associate professor David Hernandez, Mendoza speaks to the idea of labor as a driving force for many migrants to the United States. Challenging the narrative of Latinos and immigrants as a threat to the U.S.<sup>17</sup> Visually depicting the type of labor many immigrants come to do in the states, foundational jobs that in reality not many U.S. citizens are willing to do. He mentions the idea of the immigrant as a threat to the labor pool in the U.S. Utilizing the immigrant as the problem rather than the employment system in the U.S. and many of the employers that take advantage of the lack of legal security of the immigrants to extract cheap labor, conditions that many U.S. citizens would be unwilling to put up with as their status allows for a different labor pool, that undocumented people can not access.

The image of the child holding onto the back of the figure initially evoked a great amount of emotion. To contemplate this journey as a child, relying on the adults around you for safety, is a difficult reality to face. This image exemplifies the power of Mendoza's previously mentioned work, *Coyota*. Understanding the personal history of his aunts, who were entrusted to assist families in crossing the border, deepens the shift in perspective for both the coyotes and the travelers. These two sculptures provide an incredibly intimate glimpse into the intricate ecosystem of a border crosser. Mendoza creates a comprehensive environment in which an emotional response takes precedence in his work, shedding light on his personal history and the pressing humanitarian issues that require further attention.

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<sup>16</sup> “*Buscando Futuro / Finding Future.*” YouTube. YouTube, October 20, 2020.

<sup>17</sup> Chavez, L.R. “Narratives of Nation and Anti-Nation: The Media and the Construction of Latinos as a Threat to the United States,” in *Narrating peoplehood amidst diversity: Historical and theoretical perspectives*. Denmark: Aarhus University Press, 2011. pp. 183–205.

## Conclusion

In conclusion, the work of these three artists provides us with a powerful insight into the contemporary border conditions, prompting an investigation into the past to understand how and why these conditions exist in the present. Hernandez's installation piece confronts the history of border town Ciudad Juarez Femicide. Through her symbolic use of masks she confronts the viewer with the lack of acknowledgement towards the forgotten women of Juarez. Through her powerful aesthetic choices and storytelling, Hernandez aims to raise awareness, prevent future atrocities, and inspire action against violence towards women. Romero's artwork reclaims road signs, highlighting their historical and legislative significance as a symbol of border militarization. She challenges perspectives, urging for moments of silence to slow down and reflect on these histories and experiences. Mondoza's work is the representation of reminiscing, looking back on that history and representing it through a contemporary political lens, aiming to evoke the emotional response. These three artists all share a common ground, to evoke a sense of remembering, to think about the history and understand that it is not all just in the past. As everything that has been experienced, all of the legislation passed, and all of the forgotten people have culminated like a Lopez collage to end up where we are today.

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