

The border as muse: Two PST art shows look at flow of humanity between the U.S. and Mexico

By MATT STROMBERG
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Sculpture by Betsabé Romero rises like rubber-tire totems inside the Craft and Folk Art Museum's exhibit "The U.S.-Mexico Border: Place, Imagination and Possibility." The show is one of several border-centric exhibitions in Pacific Standard Time: LA/LA. (Farah Sosa)

In a darkened gallery of the Torrance Art Museum, anti-immigration protesters projected onto the wall are walking down a lonely dirt road, carrying signs reading "Stop Invasion."

In a different scene, they plant an American flag amid a rocky landscape, recalling the iconic photo of Marines raising the flag on Iwo Jima. In another, a white pickup truck does doughnuts, kicking up a cloud of dust while the driver haphazardly fires an assault rifle out the window.

"You mess with us and you're gonna mess with fire," he says to the camera. "And you're not gonna like that, you're really not, because you're opening up hell."

The vignettes in the video are reenactments of a 2014 protest in Oracle, Ariz., against the arrival of undocumented children from Central America. Mexico City artist Yoshua Okón, whose work often tackles issues of inequality, politics, power and corruption, both in Mexico and the U.S., produced the three-channel video in 2015 and titled it "Oracle."

The work is part of Pacific Standard Time: LA/LA, the Getty-funded series of exhibitions and events focused on Latin American and Latino art. But "Oracle" is certainly not the only PST show to focus on the border. The Craft and Folk Art Museum in L.A. has mounted the group exhibition "The U.S.-Mexico Border: Place, Imagination, and Possibility."

Although the two shows offer quite different perspectives on the border, a common thread is work that strives to reflect the complexity of the issues, presenting competing voices in what is too often reduced to an oversimplified and divisive us-versus-them debate. One remarkable aspect of Okón's video is that he recruited the organizers of the Oracle protest, a militia group called the Arizona Border Defenders, to restage and reinterpret their roles, creating a theatrical version of the event.

"We engaged in an honest conversation about the issues they feel passionate about," Okón said by email. "They strongly believe in their ideals and they were ready to speak up and perform in front of the cameras.... So I told them that I would let the public make up their mind, and they agreed to participate."

The focus of their anger is represented by nine Guatemalan immigrant children in a photo hanging outside the gallery, their backs turned toward the viewer. The photo documents their own performance in which they sang a version of the Marines' Hymn, modified to recount the 1954 U.S.-backed overthrow of the government in Guatemala, the origin of many of the subjects of the "Oracle" protest.

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YOSHUA OKÓN, ARTIST

Although the work is centered on the border, Okón sees a broader significance.

"I don't understand this work as a border piece. Rather, through a border location, I attempt to raise issues connected to our global economic system, issues that concern us all whether we are in Mexico City, New York City, Bombay or anywhere else in the planet," he said. "The forces that drive millions of people living under unimaginable levels of poverty to cross borders are not originated in the borders themselves. It just happens to be that it is often in the borders where this global crisis becomes visible."

The artist said he's particularly interested in Guatemala because it illustrates a global phenomenon. "Guatemala was the first place where the new postwar model of corporate colonialism was implemented," he said.

In 1954, Guatemala's democratically elected President Jacobo Árbenz was overthrown in a CIA-supported coup. The Eisenhower administration presented the coup as an attempt to thwart the scourge of communism, but lobbying by the U.S.-based United Fruit Co. played a major role. Agrarian reforms proposed by Árbenz would have reallocated much of the unused land held by the UFC, the largest landowner in Guatemala, to poor peasants and laborers. This link between nation-states and corporations is referenced in the title "Oracle," which refers not only to the site of the protest but also to the name of the successful technology company — whose first client was the CIA.

With its mixture of fact and fiction, history and performance, "Oracle" is not just about a specific event but also the way it is represented in the media, a foreshadowing of our current cultural struggle to differentiate between objective reporting and fake news, accurate data and alternative facts — or conflicting versions of truth populating your Facebook feed.

"I think he has a special way of working with real people to talk about where the truth lies between what we perceive, what's put out there in the media versus what's actually happening," said Melissa Tran, assistant curator at the Torrance museum.

In contrast to the one-dimensional depictions on anti-immigration protesters as either heroes or villains, Okón presents a more ambiguous, open-ended picture. In a 2015 Artforum interview, the artist said the protesters may not take complete control over their

image in "Oracle," but the portrayal he constructed gives a wider perspective and in his opinion is more nuanced than mainstream media.



Ana Serrano's "Cartonlandia," 2017. Stacked boxes represent the housing seen along the U.S.-Mexico border. (Farah Sosa)

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The aim of the Craft and Folk Art Museum exhibition — the work of 47 artists, designers and architects from the U.S., Mexico and beyond — is to explore the border as more than a zone of exclusion, but also as a fluid space of movement, communication and exchange.

"What we really wanted to show is that the border is not a place that divides us, but that unites us, a place that can bring new ideas and new projects together," said curator Ana Elena Mallet, who co-organized the exhibition with Lowery Stokes Sims.

They have brought together literal and symbolic interpretations of the border. Some works focus on the physical landscape, such as Ana Serrano's "Cartonlandia," a brightly colored, whimsical construction of stacked boxes inspired by the informal housing seen along the border. Architects and UC San Diego professors Teddy Cruz and

Fonna Forman have contributed a model of their Laureles Cross-Border Community Station, a combined performance space, health clinic and classroom intended for an underserved neighborhood of Tijuana.

Other artists like Tanya Aguiñiga have literally incorporated the land into their work. For her 2014 piece "Tierra," the Los Angeles-based, Tijuana-raised artist filled vinyl tubes with earth from border sites that held personal significance for her, before weaving them into a rug.



Tanya Aguiñiga's "Tierra," in the foreground, consists of vinyl tubes with earth from border sites. (Farah Sosa)



Judith Baca's sculptures of the stereotypical "sleeping Mexican" are covered in painted scenes documenting the dangers of border crossing. (Farah Sosa)

The migrant experience is on view in works like "Pancho Trinity II (La Tierra)" by pioneering Chicana artist Judith Baca, in which three sculptures of the stereotypical "sleeping Mexican" are covered in painted scenes documenting the dangers and drama of border crossing. Guillermo Galindo collects objects left behind by migrants during border crossings, incorporating them into odd musical instruments, while Margarita Cabrera transforms retired border patrol uniforms into sculptures of borderland cactuses, collaborating with immigrant women to embroider the works with stories of their journeys.

A major theme running through the exhibition is a sense of cultural hybridity and exchange that carries on despite physical barriers.

"Transborder Trajectories," a series of digital prints from the Cognate Collective, tracks complex economic networks via products like

ponchos emblazoned with the logos of NFL teams. They are produced in Mexico City before being trucked to Tijuana where they are sold as souvenirs to, among others, Mexican American visitors. A two-sided Trojan Horse sculpture by Marcos Ramírez, known as ERRE, is actually a model for a much-larger version that stood at the Tijuana crossing. With heads facing both front and back, it alludes to the daily flow of people in both directions.

Although many of the works in the show stress connections and openness between the U.S. and Mexico, a defiant subtext is definitely on view.

"For me, not only the show, but the whole of PST is an act of resistance," Mallet said. "It demonstrates that no matter who is in power, our relationships, our exchanges, our dialogues, will continue."



‘Oracle’

Where: Torrance Art Museum, 3320 Civic Center Drive

When: Ends Friday

Admission: Free

Info: (310) 618-6388, www.torranceartmuseum.com



‘The U.S.-Mexico Border: Place, Imagination, and Possibility’

Where: Craft and Folk Art Museum, 5814 Wilshire Blvd., Los Angeles

When: Through Jan. 7

Admission: \$5-\$7. Info: (323) 937-4230, www.cafam.org