

**EMBODYING BORDERLANDS: MATERIAL PRACTICES IN CONTEMPORARY
LATINX SCULPTURES**

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Embodying Borderlands: Material Practices in Contemporary Latinx Sculptures

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Introduction

In 2014, experimental musician and performance artist Guillermo Galindo (b. 1960) composed a 260-minute musical score titled “*Border Canto*.” This score was written with a combination of eight instruments, each of which was handmade by Galindo with found objects sourced from the U.S-Mexico border, including bullet shell casings found on a shooting range owned by the U.S. Border Patrol (Figure 1).

In 2016, the Arizona State University Art Museum and Desert Botanical Garden hosted art workshops for immigrant communities in collaboration with the artist Margarita Cabrera (b. 1973). Using various sewing techniques, Cabrera and workshop participants created a series of soft sculptures, titled *Space in Between* (Figure 2). Made from recycled Border Patrol uniforms, these artworks took the forms of Southwestern desert plants. Community members embroidered the pieces with stories of their immigration.

In 2017, the Museum of Fine Arts Houston debuted an artwork by Camilo Ontiveros (b. 1978) titled *Temporary Storage: The Personal Belongings of Juan Manuel Montes*. The work delicately balances items atop two sawhorses, including a suit, boxing gloves, a basketball, and other items strapped to a twin-sized bed (Figure 3). Before their exhibition in Houston, these belongings were found in the room of 23-year-old Juan Manuel who was deported from the United States in February of 2017.

Shared between their artworks is the primacy of materials as they are collected and transformed into new forms, uses, and meanings. Through their emphasis on materiality, the

artists described above collectively communicate the realities of border crossings. Each of these artists was born in Mexico but crossed the border to live and work in the United States. I argue that their artworks create a bridge between viewers and the border, reaching an audience outside of the borderlands to help them understand its impact and complexities. Moreover, they each do so through sculpture, with physical qualities that help emphasize the border's spatial and experiential qualities.

The U.S.-Mexico border has been widely interpreted as a fluid entity. In many disciplines, the border has been conceptualized as both a physical site and an idea. Seminal scholar Gloria Anzaldúa described the borderlands as “a vague and undetermined place created by the emotional residue of an unnatural boundary...in a constant state of transition.”¹ Its boundaries are porous, its geography unfixed, and its placement between nations generates new forms of transcultural relationships. From the colonial era to the present day, the boundaries between Mexico and the United States have been drawn and redrawn through political and militaristic means. In the face of its many transformations, the three artists who are the focus of this thesis use sculpture to comment on the U.S.-Mexico border, raising questions about the border's operations and its consequences.

Considerations of borders by anthropologists Thomas E. Sheridan and Randall H. McGuire are informative to the work of these artists. These authors have argued that border crossings and their outcomes should be understood as fully embodied experiences.² The authors define embodiment as the processes for individuals whose bodies are “embedded in and

¹Anzaldúa, Gloria. *Borderlands: The New Mestiza = La Frontera*, fourth edition (San Francisco: Aunt Lute Books, 2012), 3.

²Thomas E. Sheridan and Randall H. McGuire, *The Border and its Bodies: The Embodiment of Risk Along the U.S.-México Line* (Tucson: The University of Arizona Press, 2019).

interacting with their specific biocultural environments.”³ Their research gives particular attention to the sensory and bodily experiences of those who cross illegally.⁴ As they write, “the bodily experience for the privileged crossers is comfortable, routine, and efficient, while for the unruly crossers it is transgressive, physically challenging, dangerous, and erratic.”⁵ In their analyses, they claim that undocumented Mexican and Central American migrants hold the risk of border crossing within their own bodies as they live—or die—through obstacles to reach the United States. Their journey across the border physically embeds them within the landscape, mirrored by a sculpture’s embeddedness within a viewer’s field of perception. In this fully embodied viewing, these artworks collectively reflect experiential border crossings.

Not limited only to the actual crossing, Sheridan and McGuire reveal how the border has lasting impacts on the psyches and bodies of migrants, causing trauma and various health conditions. As they write, a migratory body is “in constant dialog with its surroundings and relationships, and it follows that immigrants carry the intimate imprints of migration-related stressors in their physical bodies.”⁶

Applying their definition to this art historical research, I use embodiment as an analytical framework for analyzing the corporeal aspects of border crossings found within the works of contemporary artists. These imprints of migrations found within the art convey how the border is not just a single, finite encounter but an ongoing process unfolding within immigrant bodies. By

³Sheridan and McGuire, *The Border and its Bodies: The Embodiment of Risk Along the U.S.-México Line*, 6.

⁴McGuire and Van Dyke, “Crossing la Línea: Bodily Encounters with the U.S.-México Border in Ambos Nogales” in *The Border and its Bodies: The Embodiment of Risk Along the U.S.-México Line*, 42.

⁵Ibid., 44.

⁶Thomas E. Sheridan and Randall H. McGuire “Introduction,” in *The Border and Its Bodies: The Embodiment of Risk along the U.S.-México Line* (Arizona: University of Arizona Press, 2019), 7.

incorporating the materials tied to immigrant experiences, these artworks situate viewers within space and a series of political, social, and cultural conditions.

In direct reference to the border, the artists studied here incorporate found or loaned materials sourced either from the border or from individuals impacted by border operations. Their works center personal anecdotes and material evidence of state sanctioned violence and anti-immigrant policy. The psychological effects of inflammatory rhetoric, legislation, and familial separations are difficult to comprehend in the numerical data and topographical analyses that dominate immigration discourse. By highlighting personal experiences and the material manifestations of collective pain and loss, these artists expand our understanding of immigration and borders alike.

Latinx Art History

The contemporary works studied here build on longer art historical traditions through which themes such as migration, displacement and transnational identity emerged in the United States. As described by art historian Arlene Dávila, Latinx refers to artists from Latin American backgrounds who live or work in the U.S. whether they are first generation or have a longer history here and identify with the U.S. Latinx experience. As Mexican-born artists now working primarily within the United States, this experience is shared by all three artists studied in this thesis. This classification is fruitful in that it reveals “how matters of class, race, and nationality are operationalized in contemporary art worlds,” as Dávila observes.⁷ Thus, by situating the work of these artists within Latinx art history, they interrogate the power structures that linked race and nationality in the United States. Furthermore, by considering these artists as Latinx,

⁷Arlene Dávila, *Latinx Art: Artists, Markets, and Politics* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2020), 2.

scholars may analyze the nuances found beyond the established categorizations of Latin American and American art.⁸

Within contemporary Latinx art, there are critical art historical movements specific to Mexican and Mexican American artists. In the mid to late 1960s, the Chicano Rights Movement, also known as El Movimiento, began largely with young, working-class individuals. Developed alongside the Civil Rights Movements, the Chicano Rights Movements was a socio-political movement organized by Mexican descended individuals seeking civil rights and equity. As Roberto Rodriguez summarizes, across the nation various concerns were addressed in political demonstrations, including “the struggle to improve the lives of farm workers, the effort to end Jim Crow style segregation and police repression, the land grant struggles, the struggle to improve educational opportunities and the struggle for political representation and self-determination.”⁹ Within these specific initiatives, El Movimiento embraced a Chicano identity and rejected assimilation. Chicanismo was formed as a cultural consciousness, integrating Mexico’s ancient past to Chicano activism to aid in anti-racist and anti-colonial struggles. The Chicano Rights Movement resulted in the largest and most widespread civil rights movement by Mexican-descended people in the United States.

The Chicano Art Movement emerged alongside initiatives set forth by El Movimiento. Artists created works that embraced a Chicano identity, integrating social and political themes to combat racism and assimilation. At the 1969 National Chicano Youth Liberation Conference, activists made it known that creatives were to be integral to the process of self-determination, claiming that “our writers, poets, musicians, and artists produce literature and art that is

⁸Ibid., 5.

⁹Roberto Rodriguez, “The Origins and History of the Chicano Movement,” *JSRI Occasional Paper #7* (1996): 1. <https://jsri.msu.edu/upload/occasional-papers/oc07.pdf>

appealing to our people and relates to our revolutionary culture.”¹⁰ Artists were tasked with not only creating new images but mobilizing them to aid in the more difficult task of social reform. Painting, printmaking, and photography became dominant mediums in which artists established Chicano pride and identity but also rejected traditional modes of art exhibition, such as commercial galleries and museums as these were not accessible to Mexican Americans.¹¹ These mediums were channels through which Mexican-descendent artists sought collaboration, self-determination, and evaded the exclusionary practices of the art world. Such exclusionary practices are exemplified by a former curator at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art stating in 1972 that “Chicanos make graffiti, not art.”¹²

Chicano painting took the form of large-scale murals in cities across the nation. The murals were born out of a Mexican mural painting tradition, aligning Chicanos with cultural homage to their mother country. Following the Mexican Revolution, in the early 1920s Mexican muralists were commissioned by government agencies to help fashion a national Mexican identity. In a country where illiteracy was not uncommon, mural painting became a means for the nation to visually communicate a sense of pride for a new government fueled by Socialist and Marxist beliefs. Murals were an accessible and public art form, often appearing in schools or government buildings and combining Indigenous and European traditions.

Influenced by Mexican art’s social spirit, murals began appearing in Chicano neighborhoods. These public, open spaces allowed for the art to be viewed both at close range and from a distance. They were typically community-led projects, as many muralists often collaborated not only with one another but also with merchants, residents, incarcerated youth,

¹⁰Carlos Francisco Jackson, *Chicana and Chicano Art: ProtestArte* (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 2009), 61.

¹¹*Ibid.*, 61.

¹²Chon A. Noriega, “Your Art Disgusts Me’: Early Asco, 1971—75,” *Afterall* 19, no. 19 (2008): 109.

and other locals. Some of the earliest murals were painted in the late 1960s in San Diego and San Francisco. By the mid-1970s, mural painting became a widespread practice throughout the Southwest and the Midwest. Perhaps the most well-known Chicano muralist is artist Judy (Judith) Baca. She was first commissioned as a resident artist in 1969 by the Cultural Affairs Division of the City of Los Angeles and later hired to be the director of a new citywide mural program. Throughout the 1970s, Baca organized over 500 murals throughout Los Angeles and founded the Social Public Art Resource Center. In particular, the Great Wall of Los Angeles details the history of California and the transformation of the land from the prehistoric era to the 1960s (Figure 4).¹³ Completed throughout the 1970s and 80s, the mural's prominent themes include "immigration, exploitation of people and land, women's rights, class distinctions, racism and racial equality, and the struggle for gay and lesbian rights."¹⁴ Murals like Baca's reflected a rise in Mexican American communities and importantly represented Mexican and Chicano individuals engaging in social and political activism.

Printmaking was another foundational form of art and activism for Chicanos. This medium too can be traced to Mexico, especially through the work of lithographer Jose Guadalupe Posada. In the years prior to the Mexican Revolution, he worked for news publications and magazines. His political cartoons and illustrations were printed and distributed in newspapers throughout the country. Though he died prior to the end of the Revolution, he was popularized by post-Revolutionary artists and thinkers as a figure of modern Mexican art.¹⁵

¹³In 2021, Judy Baca announced an extension of the Great Wall. This extension was completed in 2023 at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art.

¹⁴"The Great Wall of Los Angeles (Mural)," National Park Service, accessed February 11, 2024, <https://www.nps.gov/places/great-wall-of-los-angeles.htm>.

¹⁵"Posada and Mexico," Posada Art Foundation, accessed February 28, 2024, <https://www.posada-art-foundation.com/posada-and-mexico>.

Chicano prints also urgently reflected political events. Made in editions, these prints could be made from highly accessible materials. So much so that California Governor Ronald Reagan even demanded an audit of UC Berkeley's campus, claiming a “misuse of materials” when Chicano artists began using items such as folders and recycled computer tractor paper to print anti-war posters.¹⁶ Many of the early Chicano printmakers saw themselves as artists and activists. They prominently printed messages confronting injustice and claiming allyship with other marginalized groups throughout the world. Printmaking was a largely collaborative process that sowed relationships between artists and communities, but also among one another, as they founded centers and arts coalitions for the next generations of printmakers that have lasted to the present day, such as the well-known Self-Help Graphics printmaking center in Los Angeles.

The well-known print by Yolanda López *Who's the Illegal Alien, Pilgrim?* was a response to an Immigration Plan proposed by President Jimmy Carter (Figure 5). The print's main subject is an Aztec man adopting the stance of James Flagg's Uncle Sam recruitment image. Using American iconography, López challenged ideas about land ownership, political dominance, and anti-immigrant policy. Similarly, Rupert Garcia's 1973 *¡Cesen Deportación!* (Figure 6) assertively calls for the immediate stop of deportations of undocumented Mexican immigrants, especially those with ambiguous status like former *braceros*. Using art to reflect on developing political initiatives, these artists and their contemporaries utilized printmaking as a tool for organizing. Unmediated by arts institutions, these works circulated publicly and widely. As events unfolded, Chicano printmakers in the 70s and 80s remained on the heels of politics, dedicated to making artwork in support of reform.

¹⁶E. Carmen Ramos et al., *Printing the Revolution: the Rise and Impact of Chicano Graphics, 1965 to Now* (Washington, DC: Smithsonian American Art Museum, 2020), 32.

In the years that followed the height of the Chicano Art Movement, many artists experimented with other artmaking methods to explore immigration and identity. As early as the 1980s, artists began engaging directly at the border through installation and participatory art. For example, The Border Art Workshop/Taller de Arte Fronterizo (BAW/TAF) collective was founded in 1984 and composed of Mexican, American, and Chicano artists. Conceptual in nature, the group sought to “discover and define the myriad levels of a border consciousness.”¹⁷ Born from southern California’s Chicano movements, artists created what is now known as border art. Border art generated installations, multimedia works and performances to speak to issues related to immigration. By employing a wide variety of mediums, the BAW/TAF was instrumental in linking experimental methods of artmaking with border concerns. For example, their work titled *End of the Line* (1986) was a site-specific performance/event that took place at the end of the border fence where Tijuana and San Diego meet at the Pacific Ocean, destabilizing the boundaries of the border. Various members took on Mexican and American stereotypes to highlight the absurdities of media stereotypes. The library at the University of San Diego, which holds BAW/TAF’s archival documents and oral histories, describes this performance as an attempt to create a sense of no border, challenging the media conceptualization of the border as a war zone of social tensions. The piece established the border as a possibility of peaceful interactions.¹⁸

¹⁷“The Border Art Workshop (BAW / TAF) 1984-1989 = Taller de Arte Fronterizo (BAW - TAF) 1984-1989,” School of the Art Institute of Chicago Library & Special Collections, accessed February 11, 2023, <https://digitalcollections.saic.edu/islandora/object/islandora%3A14006>.

¹⁸“Michael Schnorr Collection of Border Art Workshop/Taller de Arte Fronterizo Records, 1978-2011,” University of California, San Diego, accessed February 28th 2024, https://library.ucsd.edu/speccoll/DigitalArchives/mss0760/mss0760_Projects.pdf.

Since the conception of the BAW/TAF, more and more artists as individuals and collectives have created artwork to highlight these transnational relationships. The 1993 exhibition “Frontera/The Border: Art about The Mexico/United States Border Experience” was the first large-scale exhibition that sought to bring these realities to museum spaces. Made in collaboration between the Centro Cultural de la Raza, Balboa Park and the Museum of Contemporary Art, San Diego, the exhibition was expansive. Including nearly 40 artists and collaborators, the exhibition showcased a breadth of working artists who were assertively political in their practices. Importantly, the exhibition also included artwork made outside of the borderlands to showcase how border culture can permeate outside of its walls and border cities.¹⁹

Thus, border art created between Mexico and the U.S. generated new forms of artmaking and art practice intended to foster more nuanced understandings of the border and its surrounding communities. Concurrent with these amicable relationships created between American and Mexican residents in the borderlands, however, were the sharp realities of borderlands. As curator of La Frontera Patricio Chávez claimed, within the borderlands race, hybridization, and privileges are “not theoretical notions, but daily lived realities.”²⁰ While the borderlands and border art was conscious of its own confluences, the border continued to operate through the logic of opposition and difference.

These concerns for transnational relationships became increasingly addressed by artists on both sides of the U.S.-Mexico border. For example, the Mexican artist Eduardo Abaroa (b. 1968) created *Portable Broken Obelisk for Outdoor Markets* (1991–93/2015) (Figure 8). Made

¹⁹Patricio Chávez and Madeleine Grynstejn, “Introduction” in *La Frontera/The Border: Art about the Mexico/United States Border Experience* (San Diego: Centro Cultural de la Raza, 1993).

²⁰Patricio Chávez, *La Frontera/The Border: Art about the Mexico/United States Border Experience* (San Diego: Centro Cultural de la Raza, 1993), xviii.

from pink tarpaulin, a heavy-duty canvas, the artist riffs on Barnett Newman's modern sculpture *Broken Obelisk* (1963–69). In his display of the work, first at a Mexican artist-run gallery and later in an open-air market, Abaroa subverts the terms of modernist sculpture, opting for the ephemeral nature of canvas materials and temporary display. Further the use of cheap, heavy-duty material was a decision made in direct response to the then-developing North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA). Made official in 1994, NAFTA enabled a free trade zone between Mexico, the United States and Canada. Its implementation led to outcomes such as cheap imported goods and the loss of Mexican jobs and agriculture. Abaroa incorporates materials easily described as cheap and nontraditional, and his work highlights the growing interactions, even tensions, between Mexico and the United States as a result of globalized trade.

Importantly, the materials used in *Portable Broken Obelisk for Outdoor Markets* align with the art sensibility known as *rasquachismo*. Stemming from the Nahuatl word *rascuache*, it denotes that which is vulgar, poor, or of a lower quality, status, or value and is associated with a person of these same characteristics. First proposed by scholar Tomás Ybarra-Frausto in 1989, *rasquachismo* defines a sensibility held by people of Mexican descent that combines a type of “underdog” perspective with survivalist tendencies found in people living on both sides of the U.S.-Mexico border. In short, it is the belief that one gets by in daily life through strategic and creative methods, making do with the materials or realities one currently has instead of focusing on any lack thereof. At its core is the transformation of materials, making the most from the least, using discarded recycled materials, even fragments, rooted in resourcefulness and adaptability.²¹ This methodology speaks well to the artists analyzed in this thesis, as they re-use

²¹Tomás Ybarra-Frausto, “Research material on Chicano art, 1965-2004.” Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, <https://www.aaa.si.edu/collections/toms-ybarrafrausto-research-material-chicano-art-5563>.

and transform common materials. What is more, their choice of materials contains symbolic meaning, acting almost as artifacts to connote the difficulties of immigration. Moving beyond the state of remnant or discard, the materials resonate with viewers in public display.

In tandem with art developments from both Mexico and the United States, the sculptures analyzed in this thesis are born out of modern art strategies. Cabrera, Ontiveros, and Galindo maintain sculptural strategies drawn from unconventional materials and mobilize these materials to make art in response to historical conditions that are best understood through a highly sensory viewing experience. In this vein, the sculptural medium is productive in communicating embodied experiences related to the border.

The sculptures I analyze in the next section emerge from various art traditions: 1) artwork made by Mexican descended individuals made with intent for social and political reform; 2) a history of artworks by Mexican (American) artists that, out of experimentation and intervention, comment on politics, land, ethnicity and nationality; 3) a Mexican sensibility to surpass material, political, or economic shortcomings through reusing discarded or fragmented materials. While the Chicano Rights Movement unfolded within the mid-20th century, there is considerable sentiment among scholars and activists that El Movimiento has not ended. As the following artworks present, the issues raised in the end of the 1900s have not been sufficiently remedied at institutional levels and still impact Latino populations today. Furthermore, the transnational concerns brought forth by Chicano art and activism during El Movimiento have persisted even without a widespread socio-political movement.

The sculptures analyzed in the next section can be understood more critically as branches within Latinx art. They represent significant contributions made by artists of a Latinx diaspora

whose sensibilities to race, nationality, and colonial legacies are not just pertinent but at the core of their artworks.

Latinx Sculptures

Margarita Cabrera, *Space in Between*

Examining the border as a site, Margarita Cabrera's *Space in Between* series represents various cacti and desert plant sculptures of the American Southwest. These soft sculptures are made from recycled border patrol uniforms. Made in collaborations between the artist and immigrant communities, Cabrera organizes workshops to teach embroidery techniques to immigrants. She incorporates sewing methods from Los Tenangos, Hidalgo, Mexico where colorful art and narrative traditions stem from indigenous Otomi groups. Working together, they create sculptures that are embroidered with images that reflect their experiences at the border. In highlighting Southwestern landscapes, Cabrera can specify a site of encounter between immigrant and government.

As exemplified by *Nopal (Sara Hernandez)* (2016), the surfaces of Margarita Cabrera's soft sculptures compose their own topographies. Their segments are unevenly stuffed, loose threads hang from seams and raw hems, their stitches overlap and interlock throughout the forms, and cactus flowers balloon on tops of each cactus segment. Planted in Mexican terracotta pots, these fabric sculptures depict the native flora and fauna of the American Southwest, especially parts of the region recognized as commonly traveled immigration routes. The sculptures range from short and stout plants to large fauna with protruding arms that are kept stable with help from wire inside the work. These pieces are commonly displayed in mass,

evoking vast desert and landscapes within otherwise sanitary museum and gallery spaces (Figure 9).

Each artwork incorporates constellations of embroidered imagery. Examples include depictions of La Virgen de Guadalupe, church buildings, American and Mexican flags, graduation caps, pocket watches, birds, setting suns, roses, or hands clasped in prayer. In *Space in Between – Saguaro* (2016), the base of the cactus is inscribed with the words “*el desierto fue peligroso*” [the desert was dangerous], noting the harsh conditions of the landscape. Along the cactus arms, other inscriptions convey that the embroiderer “*deje mi vida y mis raíces*” [I Left my life and my roots] (Figure 10). Within the main form of the cactus, the embroiderer sewed figural representations of their family, labeling the parents and children with text, with a nearby inscription reading “*luchar por la familia*” [fight for the family].

These inscriptions are common features of the works in Cabrera’s series. The embroidery is not typically large, with many of the embellishments only taking up a few inches worth of the fabric’s surface area to invite close looking. Almost all of the works in the series contain figural representations of families. Often, the embroiderer’s name is incorporated into the titles of each sculpture, such as *Nopal (Magdalena R.S.)*.

The earliest iterations of the series were created in 2010 in Texas, where Cabrera’s own family immigrated in her early childhood and remained for decades. With the desire to acknowledge the lived experiences of immigrant populations, invoke Native epistemologies, and foster communal art making, Cabrera arranged workshops in cities like El Paso, Houston, North Carolina, and Arizona. In these workshops, immigrants shared their own anecdotes about crossing the border, a journey that is often fraught with grief and loss, but also resilience and union. Cabrera then organized art making sessions, where participants sketched drawings about

their immigration stories and learned Indigenous embroidery techniques. With these skills, they transform sketches into stitches on the surfaces of recycled border patrol uniforms. Cabrera has maintained this workshop structure to the present day.

While these sculptures highlight the physical movement of individuals across national boundaries, the circulation of the uniform's fabric signals another form of movement. Cabrera frequently sources her uniforms from flea markets. This methodology certainly aligns with the practice of *rasquachismo*, as flea markets or *pulgas* sell and circulate cheap or discarded objects. More importantly, the acts of transformation throughout *rasquachismo* create new vocabularies and aesthetics that are inventive in their reuse of materials. The garment, once worn by an agent of a militarized and violent border agency, moved to merchants and finally to an immigrant/artist. In the face of power and intimidation, an embroiderer can now override the garment's existing essence with their own, confronting the border police with every stitch.

Unlike the sculpture analyzed in the follow sections, Cabrera generates a transparent and first-person representation of the border's impact.²² In Cabrera's sculptures, this "personal memory work" is exemplified both in the act of sewing and in the documentation of such personal narratives. For example, Cabrera relays the story of one participant who lost a child to the dangerous currents of the Rio Grande in their attempt to reach the border.²³ The mother survived by resisting the current and grabbing onto *carrizos*, river plants that grow from the river's sandy banks. Encounters with these *carrizos* are not uncommon. In the sculpture titled *Carrizos (Teresa Sanchez Garay)*, the plant is sewn with many loosely hanging threads dangling

²²Irene Bronner, "Parodies of Female Flesh in the Fabric Sculptures of Tamara Kostianovsky," *Textile: The Journal of Cloth and Culture* 15, no. 4 (2017): 368.

²³Maximiliano Durón, "Searching for the In-between: Margarita Cabrera's Collaborative Art Thinks beyond Borders," ARTnews.com, November 18, 2019, <https://www.artnews.com/art-news/artists/searching-margarita-cabrerass-collaborative-art-thinks-beyond-borders-10456/>.

from the tops of the plant's stalks (Figure 11). Looking towards the middle of the plant, details like barbed wire spokes and netting wrap around its surface, as other desert plants wind around these details. For the community members who participate in the making of these sculptures, the threads weave in the memories and histories of survival.²⁴

What is distinct in Cabrera's work is the use of textiles and craft techniques as a tool for resistance. Sewing and embroidery are often gendered skills that are passed between female family or community members. Feminist artists of the 1970s used fabric as a means to disrupt art traditions that see textiles as inferior to more traditional media seen in "fine art."²⁵ Sewing as a means of production is also increasingly a gendered space, as sewing manufacturing and sweatshops worldwide employ a largely female workforce to mass produce garments. Many of these workers endure unreasonable conditions and pay. Cabrera's work emerged from her own interest in *maquiladoras*, infamous factories built along the border that exploit working-class immigrant populations. Thus, in addition to the subject matter, the processes that generate these artworks consider intersections of race, class, and gender. As art historian Angelique Szymanek explains when discussing Cabrera's works, they are "invested in transforming...the ways immigration policies, labor injustice, and cultural production shape identity and perceptions of people migrating."²⁶

The use of these specific textiles is critical. In her analysis of meaning and materials in contemporary sculpture, scholar Sherri Irvin develops a sculptural theory known as inclusion content, which she explains as the content a sculptural work holds through the use of specific

²⁴Julio Morales et al., *Margarita Cabrera: Space in Between* (Ciudad de México, México: Temblores Publicaciones, 2013), 21.

²⁵Rozsika Parker, *The Subversive Stitch: Embroidery and the Making of the Feminine* (New York; London; I.B. Tauris, 2010).

²⁶Angelique Szymanek, "Haptic Encounters: Margarita Cabrera's Space in Between," *Art Journal*, 79, no. 3 (New York, 2020): 70-79.

materials or objects. The material composes the work's subject matter, and it also contributes to the work's visual appearance through elements such as color, texture, and shape.²⁷ Furthermore, these materials determine the physical appearance of the work but can bring forth the "historical and/or functional attributes" that shape its viewing²⁸. For example, in Cabrera's sculptures, the uniform's fabric allows for certain visual qualities. The green of the uniforms lends itself to how we see and understand plant life, but also reminds viewers that green fabric is used to conceal a military officer amongst foliage. Camouflaging is essential to the survival of an officer in combat, and equally necessary for the migrant crossing the borderlands who must go undetected. It emphasizes the transformation of the border from a natural landscape with blooming desert plants and a roaring river into a geopolitical region.

These artworks also challenge common visual representations of border crossings. In their analysis of Middle Eastern surveillance and United States occupation, scholar Ronak Kapadia argues how military operations create abstract visual vocabularies that aid in the control of populations. If, as Kapadia puts it, the "power to *see* [becomes] the power to *know* and to *dominate*,"²⁹ then these artworks reject the visuals that have become typical of the U.S.-Mexico border, where methods of militarization reign. Their forms reject objectivity to emphasize handmade craftsmanship and provide material narratives by those who endured border crossings. Indeed, Cabrera herself has called these sculptures "historical and cultural documents" largely because they log personal histories not common in traditional archives.³⁰ Their handmade qualities and details such as the long, dangling embroidery threads act in opposition to

²⁷Sherri Irvin, "Materials and Meaning in Contemporary Sculpture," in *Philosophy of Sculpture: Historical Problems, Contemporary Approaches* (New York: Routledge, 2020): 165-186.

²⁸Ibid., 168.

²⁹Ronak K. Kapadia, "Up in the Air and On the Skin," in *Critical Ethnic Studies: A Reader* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2016): 365.

³⁰Arizona State University Art Museum, "Space in Between – Arizona (Short)", Vimeo, 2016.

mechanical or technological image making that often stems from borders, such as maps or Infrared imaging. These works replace this empirical knowledge with art objects that center autobiographical presence, unlike faceless governmental agencies. In other words, these artworks do not want to dominate, they want to communicate and generate change. By subverting the materials from their role in border security, Cabrera's series produces new knowledge of immigration.

The borderlands are crucial to the conception of these artworks. Further, the artist has frequently credited the concept of *nepantla* within her practice. Used famously by Chicano scholar Gloria Anzaldua, the Nahuatl term *nepantla* considers the possibility of being between two places and is frequently used to describe the oscillation between two cultures, especially if one seems dominant. Cabrera adopts this framework, stating that "the process of creating alternative spaces in which to live, function, or create" is crucial.³¹ This term is commonly used to describe people who live in border communities, many who travel back and forth between the United States and Mexico in their daily lives. The term thus reinforces the idea that the borderlands and its residents create specific dynamics that challenge opposition and difference.

Rather than carrying out the divisions a border wall seeks, immigrant communities can create new consciousness and partnerships in opposition to boundaries, classifications, or dominant cultures. Cabrera has stated that she hopes viewers will one day come across thousands of these works in one space.³²

The immigrant communities who have contributed their time and embroidery to these works have already been impacted by what lies beyond in-betweenness: danger, opposition, and

³¹David S. Rubin, "Margarita Cabrera's Community-Based Activism," Glasstire, November 27, 2016, <https://glasstire.com/2016/11/27/margarita-cabrerass-community-based-activism/>.

³²Talley Dunn Gallery, "Artist Talk, Margarita Cabrera @ Talley Dunn Gallery," Youtube, March 15, 2015, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=B20zvwLFPg>.

vulnerability. The border's operations cast immigrants as racialized and unwelcomed bodies, and that distinction necessitated community building. Through immigrants' resilience and collaborative art making, we can replace the binaries that dominate border patrol strategies. While the border is certainly not the final location in migrant travel, the border sets the conditions through which migrants must position themselves in relation to, as the next sculpture demonstrates. These conditions are both social and political, as they establish race, class, and privilege to immigrants after they have crossed the border.

Camilo Ontiveros, *Temporary Storage: The Belongings of Juan Manuel Montes*

Temporary Storage: The Belongings of Juan Manuel Montes demonstrates how the border's reach can extend beyond its physical location. Balanced carefully on top of sawhorses, artist Camilo Ontiveros arranged an assortment of objects, including a twin-sized bed, welding instruction books, a karate uniform, a flat-screen TV, a basketball, an office chair, red boxing gloves, a full-length door mirror, a bicycle and clothing. Peeking subtly throughout the cluster is a photo of a young boy. The items are bound together tightly by rope, criss-crossing around and between individual objects (Figures 12, 13).

As the title asserts, these objects are not random or unrelated. They are the personal property of a young man named Juan Manuel Montes. In February of 2017, at age 23, Montes was deported from Calexico, CA to Mexicali, Mexico after an alleged unlawful crossing into Mexico. His case was publicized because of his DACA status, which allowed for his residence in the U.S. despite being undocumented. His deportation, overseen by U.S. Customs and Border Patrol, was considered unfounded by his lawyers and various activist groups, who pointed to the conflicting narratives by government agencies that justified his detainment and expulsion from

the country. In fact, the Department of Homeland Safety, which had initially claimed that Montes's DACA protections expired in 2015, later argued that they never deported him at all and that he decided to leave the U.S. on his own.³³

DACA, the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals, is an immigration policy created in 2012 under the Obama administration by the Department of Homeland Safety (DHS). According to the U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services, DACA allows for certain individuals, particularly those who were brought to the United States as children with their legal guardians and have remained in the country for various years, to avoid deportation and other removal services despite their unlawful presence. There are other requirements the Department of Homeland Safety considers when granting this kind of authorization, such as student enrollment and employment. Under DACA, undocumented youth and young adults are not able to access benefits that are available to those who hold citizenship or legal residential status within the U.S., nor does the policy allow for immigrants to obtain U.S. citizenship in a more streamlined manner. In other words, this program does not grant any benefits or privileges, it only allows Dreamers to remain in the United States where they can legally continue to work or study. For those who hold DACA status, this program suspends them in time, providing them social security numbers that are only temporary. Dreamers live their lives within 8-year cycles through which they must remain eligible to re-apply for DACA status. In 2017, when Juan Manuel Montes was deported, the program granted this status to about 800,000 individuals.³⁴

³³Department of Homeland Safety, "DHS Statement on Former DACA Recipient Juan Manuel Montes- Bojorquez," April 19, 2017, <https://www.dhs.gov/news/2017/04/19/dhs-statement-former-daca-recipient-juan-manuel-montes-bojorquez>.

³⁴U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services, "Approximate Active DACA Recipients" 2017. https://www.uscis.gov/sites/default/files/document/data/daca_population_data.pdf

While a record-breaking history of Mexican deportations preceded 2016, Montes' deportation happened under the Trump administration, which was known for its anti-immigrant rhetoric and policy.³⁵ During his campaign, Donald Trump made various promises to end DACA. Such promises began as early as 2016 at the announcement of his presidential campaign, when Trump claimed, "I will immediately terminate President Obama's illegal executive order on immigration, immediately."³⁶ In September of 2017, months after his inauguration, he did. While the Supreme Court blocked the plan to phase out DACA in 2020, DACA recipients, commonly referred to as Dreamers, are perpetually subject to the reality that renewals are not guaranteed.

Montes' case ignited fear in many immigrant communities, but especially amongst DACA recipients. If one young man could be deported despite his legal protections, then the future seemed bleak for those in similar circumstances and living under an administration that proudly promised the end of this program. The words "temporary storage" offer hope that one day this sculpture's will end if legislation permits, as Juan Manuel Montes could collect his belongings. A change in presidency, along with its echoes in state and local government within the country, can have devastating effects on those who rely on DACA's policies. Montes' case reveals that technicalities will displace an individual in a matter of hours.³⁷

Unlike Cabrera and Galindo, Ontivero's material manipulation is minimal. This sculpture is a re-creation of a previous work by Ontiveros from 2009. That piece, *Temporary Storage*

³⁵Krogstad Gonzales-Barrera, "U.S. deportations of immigrants reach record high in 2013," 2014.

<https://www.pewresearch.org/short-reads/2014/10/02/u-s-deportations-of-immigrants-reach-record-high-in-2013/>

³⁶Katie Reilly, "Here's What President Trump Has Said About DACA in the Past," *Time Magazine*, September 5, 2017. <https://time.com/4927100/donald-trump-daca-past-statements/#:~:text=%E2%80%9CWe%20will%20immediately%20terminate%E2%80%9D%20DACA&text=That%20speech%20echoed%20the%20promise,he%20said%20at%20that%20time.>

³⁷At the end of 2017, Juan Manuel dropped his case against the federal government. Three years into the Biden administration, we can assume that he remains in Mexico.

(Figure 14), was composed of the artist's own materials while he was experiencing temporary homelessness during his time in graduate school. Ontiveros' practice has consistently privileged materials that tie directly to migrant experiences, especially materials that are found in cargo truck beds that transverse between the United States and Mexico. When asked by curators at the MFA Houston to contribute a piece to an upcoming exhibition, Ontiveros found it urgent to revisit the work. Soon after, Ontiveros became aware of Montes' case, contacting Montes' legal team and then Montes' mother. Though his mother has chosen to remain anonymous, she was intrigued by the idea of presenting Juan Manuel's case through a work of art.³⁸ An immigrant himself, Ontiveros remarked how Montes' own circumstances are all too familiar to the artist:

What brought me to Juan Manuel is I see a reflection of me. I was here illegally...I think my grandfather paid someone. I used somebody else's papers. It was this business people in Tijuana had. I had to go there and learn my new identity in six hours: where I was born, where I went to school. Then I crossed through immigration...I was interested in the merger of economies and cultures...and I was thinking about movement and being able to pack all of your belongings and be ready to move...That piece was all of my belongings –everything I owned at that moment ...This thing weighed a ton. I wouldn't be able to put it on my shoulders. I was thinking about movement in this absurd way. I was playing with the same absurdity of a law.³⁹

This quote demonstrates how Ontiveros embodied circumstances similar to Juan Manuel. In both iterations of *Temporary Storage*, the work's composition reflects the precarious nature of citizenship and policy in the United States. *Temporary Storage* highlights the embodied experiences of Juan Manuel and those like him, including Ontiveros. The work highlights the reality that home, for undocumented immigrants especially, might be a turbulent and unfixed place. This instability causes discomfort, fear, and anxiety. By suspending Montes' property

³⁸Carolina A. Miranda, "How artist Camilo Ontiveros acquired the belongings of a DACA deportee and what he did with them," September 25, 2017, https://www.chicano.ucla.edu/files/news/LATimes_CamiloOntiveros_091517.pdf.

³⁹Miranda, 2017.

within a sculptural form, Ontiveros highlights the physical stakes of this tension, as one object bears the weight of another. The expression of this embodiment is also denoted by the highlight of one specific individual. While Juan Manuel may bear similarities to other undocumented individuals, this sculpture prompts an understanding of his individual circumstances. The possessions that compose the artwork indicate his own interests and needs and his position in the nation. The sculpture is not made of materials that want to resemble his belongings, nor does it want to conceal any part of his belongings in the presentation of the work.

Rasquachismo certainly involves material culture and certain aesthetic qualities, but *rasquachismo* is not limited to physical appearance. Many interpretations of *rasquachismo* characterize its appearance as kitschy, flamboyant, in poor taste, etc. However, as Ybarra-Frausto has claimed, *rasquachismo* is not limited to an idea nor a style. Rather, it can be also understood as the ways of relating to and undermining forms of power, an act of defiance or resistance to hegemonic structures. The materiality of the sculpture bears elements of *rasquachismo*. These materials are humble and exposed and literally someone's used belongings, and their semblance to cargo denotes resourcefulness and survival. While their severance from Juan Manuel complicates some *rasquachismo* characterizations that are celebratory or flamboyant, they still demonstrate racial and class dynamics at the heart of *rasquachismo*.

Even beyond its art sensibilities, *rasquachismo* has been applied to the methodologies of migrant movement. Scholar David Spener applies *rasquachismo* to his study of the use of *coyotes* (people who smuggle Latin Americans across the US borders) by unauthorized crossers. The *coyotes*' operations are not necessarily professional nor reliable, as they are evading national regulatory systems. Likewise, Spener highlights his observation of the term *coyotes rasquaches* by Mexican communities in Nuevo Leon to describe *coyotes* that are "small scale...highly

regarded and more likely to be relied upon by people...than more professional, “commercial” coyotes based at the border itself.”⁴⁰ While we have no way to clarify Montes’ own methods to enter the county, Ontiveros’ own use of fraudulent documents to navigate the border reflects this very unconventional wayfinding. Moreover, Spener analyzes the development of *rasquachismo* in Ybarra-Frausto’s texts that predate his seminal 1989 essay. Throughout his writings, Ybarra-Frausto notes how the insecurity of working-class existence is reflected through “ephemeral qualities, or a sense of temporality and impermanence—literally here today and gone tomorrow.”⁴¹ Speaking to Montes’ fragile citizenship status and subsequent impermanence in the U.S., the sculpture is not just *rasuqache* in material but in its reflections of impermanence and instability.

Ontiveros’ sculpture also presents an intersection of inquiries about immigrants, their bodies, and their agency. In her analysis of “illegal” migrants in Israel, anthropologist Sarah Willen argued that consequences of being “illegal” shape one’s movement throughout the world and warps one’s sense of time and experiences of space, “in particular, the paradoxically dangerous space called “home.”⁴² Even as a DACA recipient, Montes was an undocumented individual, and his lived experiences hinged on a place between legal status and social condition. In Willen’s research, this leads to findings of heightened anxiety and non-agency within migrant bodies. For *Temporary Storage...*, these fears are actualized. Montes’ presence is there, among galleries, yet he is not. His belongings convey dislocation, tethered to him yet acting as the shadow cast by his essence.

⁴⁰David Spener, "Movidas Rascuaches: Strategies of Migrant Resistance at the Mexico-U.S. Border," *Aztlán*, 35, no. 4 (2010): 9-36.

⁴¹Ibid., 15.

⁴²Sarah S. Willen, "Toward a Critical Phenomenology of "Illegality": State Power, Criminalization, and Abjectivity among Undocumented Migrant Workers in Tel Aviv, Israel," *International Migration* 45, no. 3 (2007): 8-38.

In the same way that DACA can suspend Dreamers in limbo, the sawhorses suspend all materials in the air. The assortment of items is balanced precariously atop one another despite a seemingly stable foundation. Ontiveros' choice of materials, such as sawhorses and ropes that are used for construction and other forms of manual labor, point to the types of labor that are often linked with immigrants. Ontiveros' work builds on his longstanding interest in the perceived value of immigrants, particularly through economics, and this notion often enters immigration discourse. There are endless news articles and reports that assert how immigrants are necessary actors in the national economy, contributing billions of dollars in taxes and making up a considerable percentage of the workforce.⁴³ The inclination to measure migrant impact from their contributions to the economy and the workforce is frequent in immigration discourse. Terms such as the “economic migrant” or “migrant workers” convey the perception of immigrants as hard-working and industrious individuals. Ontiveros' decision to include details such as the welding manual and the sawhorses demonstrate how immigrants, especially Dreamers, are frequently bound to discussions of labor, trade, and capital.

The regulation of goods across international borders, spurred largely by globalization, bears striking resemblance to the regulation of the movement of people across borders. Ontiveros' investigation of migration, movement, and trade asks questions about the systems that measure what and who may be allowed to move freely across borders and how those systems come to define value, capital, and exchange. This reference to movement reflects how dislocation is a prevalent condition for migrants. Juan Manuel's body was one that was found to be unlawful. His expulsion to Mexico revealed the limitations of his own body's agency as a Dreamer, overruled by the agencies tasked with regulating, tracking, and finally deporting him.

⁴³American Immigration Council reports, 2023. <https://data.americanimmigrationcouncil.org/map-the-impact/>

In ways that immigrants can be unwillingly displaced, *Temporary Storage...* spotlights the tangible evidence of immigration policy and its disruption. The border is made tangible through belongings held thousands of miles away from its owner because of unstable policy. Ontiveros' focus on a particular individual's circumstances narrows the consequences of unstable immigrant policy. While that precarity is institutional, its consequences are hardly specified. Further, his outspokenness on his similarities to Juan Manuel reveals the border's range, no longer held within its own demarcations and reaching for individuals daily. Scholar Gilberto Rosas has argued how the borderlands condition now blurs the "insides and the outsides of the United States with respect to Latin American, primarily Mexican, immigration."⁴⁴ These "thickening borderlands," to use Rosas' term, no longer require the physical border to operate, but have been made mobile and therefore more efficient. The border's conception has now developed with increased militarization and implementation of severe anti-immigrant policies from state and federal governments. For those who have crossed, the border does not remain a fixed location of the past, but it continues to haunt and extends the border "into the interior of nation-states amid...neoliberal globalization across much of the globe."⁴⁵

For someone like Juan Manuel Montes, whose life in the United States is determined first and foremost by citizenship status, these thickening borderlands highlight the precarity of immigrant futures. Though Juan Manuel is one individual amongst hundreds of thousands of DACA recipients, the sculpture brings forth the specificity of his case and his own subjective experiences. In line with Galindo and Cabera's motivations, Ontiveros seeks to bring forth events unfolding before our eyes. His look to the future, suggested in the titling of the work,

⁴⁴Gilberto Rosas, "The Border Thickens: In-Securing Communities After IRCA." *International Migration* 54, no. 2 (2016): 119-130.

⁴⁵Gilberto Rosas, "The Thickening Borderlands: Bastard Mestiz@s, "Illegal" Possibilities, and Globalizing Migrant Life," in *Critical Ethnic Studies: A Reader* 18 (Durham: Duke University Press, 2016), 346.

signals a desire for change and for reunion. Yet in the present, the items shift from an individual's belongings into an art object, one now owned permanently by the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston. Even with the optimism the title presents, the artwork would encounter different questions regarding agency and commodities should Juan Manuel ever return to the country. Despite its potential problems, the artwork more profoundly signals Frausto's ideas that "rasquache equals survival with hope."⁴⁶ This hope endures despite risks, precarity, and displacement.

Guillermo Galindo, *Shell Piñata/Piñata de casquillos*

Since 2014, experimental composer and performance artist Guillermo Galindo has conducted a series of performances related to his 260-minute musical score *Border Canto*. The performances utilize a series of instruments, which he calls "sonic devices," that are built from recycled objects sourced along the border. Collected by American photographer Richard Misrach in 2011 for a collaboration with Galindo, these objects include discarded clothing, empty water bottles and jugs, animal bones, ladders, and even fragmented sections of the border wall itself. Galindo and Misrach began their project together, traversing the border and collecting objects there. However, Galindo was discouraged from traveling along the border due to frequent Customs and Border Patrol questioning. The risks became too great for him, and soon Misrach would travel the border alone searching for potential instrumental materials.⁴⁷ When he located a promising item at the border, he would send an image to Galindo to gauge its worth as an

⁴⁶Spener, "Movidias Rascuaches: Strategies of Migrant Resistance at the Mexico-U.S. Border," 17.

⁴⁷Ruth Erickson and Eva Respini, *When Home Won't Let You Stay: Migration through Contemporary Art* (New Haven; Yale University Press, 2019), 116.

instrumental component. If Galindo approved an object, Misrach arranged for it to be mailed to Galindo.

Among these materials are the bullet shell casings that compose the sonic device titled *Shell Piñata/Piñata de casquillos* (Figures 1, 15). *Shell Piñata* is made from flattened metal fragments cut into small hexagonal sheets, recalling the shape of numerous soccer balls that the artists encountered in their border excavations. Galindo fused together the panels to make the piñata's base, from which various peaks extend outward. Unlike other piñatas, where attached streamers and tissue paper dance around the form as it bounces in the air, Galindo's piñata is embellished with empty bullet casings that are strewn around with metal chains linked throughout the perimeter of the piñata's surface. They were sourced near Brownsville, TX from a practice shooting range for Border Patrol agents (Figure 16).

The sounds emitted by these materials are similar to that of a rattle. In one performance, Galindo holds *Shell Piñata* in front of his torso, holding one of its peaks in each hand to slowly rotate the instrument (Figure 17). The instrument produces a kind of rhythm that is unpredictable, with the clanking of metal chains and plastic casings moving almost as waves making contact with the metal base. Taking advantage of a U.S. bureaucratic system that would not disrupt their movements, the project resulted in the Border Canto, numerous performances by Galindo, and eight primary instruments used throughout those performances, including *Shell Piñata*. Galindo uses these sonic devices not just to perform the Border Canto, but also to perform *limpias*. The *limpia* is a tradition practiced throughout Latin America that serves to cleanse a person of bad energy, especially following a traumatic or disruptive life event. The *limpia*, which is understood to have ancient origins, does not always necessitate the use of sound to cleanse someone, but Galindo's sonic device/*limpias* involve the playing of the instruments

and dynamics movements to heal affected individuals. Highly sensorial, these performances center presence and experience to which viewers must bear witness. Similarly, *limpias* are completely experiential. Hearing the music, feeling its vibrations, and seeing the use of these objects is imperative to the act of healing, and requires the body as a vessel for transformation.

In the same way that migrant movements act as a catalyst for the firing of a gun along the border, Galindo's movements redirect this violence. His works create new sounds and purpose, turning a bullet's intended use on its head. The spiritual cleansing occurs inwardly to relieve one's burdens, and the record of healing remains within the sculpture's components. Without their incorporation in Galindo's sculpture, they would have remained undetected at the border. Yet Galindo's work has long negotiated the difference between music and art. He once how these sonic devices offer a rich juxtaposition between absence and presence, stating that "unlike visual art, sound is a volatile, time-based medium."⁴⁸ Music and sounds have intangible qualities that are mediated by its material instruments. Through these frameworks, Galindo's sculptures refute the notion of violence as invisible, immaterial actions.

This use of sculpture for performance is a compelling distinction from Cabrera and Ontiveros. When the sonic devices are not in use for live performances, they are displayed as standalone sculptures. The casings, made with brightly colored plastic, are both eye-catching and haunting. These specific materials are central to the healing rituals at stake in Galindo's work. As a sculpture, *Shell Piñata*'s form replicates that of its referent, connoting festivities, leisure and togetherness. In activating its sound, it becomes ritualistic, performed so that one may find reconciliation. However, its materiality supplants these connotations with the danger of border

⁴⁸Chon A. Noriega, Mari Carmen Ramírez, and Pilar Tompkins Rivas, *Home- So Different, So Appealing* (Los Angeles, California: UCLA Chicano Studies Research Center Press, 2017), 106.

politics and state sanctioned violence. Seemingly, these objects lie dormant, waiting for their creator to activate their sound and their abilities. I propose, however, that their material composition makes them anything but dormant. The way this change is proposed is through a three-dimensional artwork, as Galindo asserts that sounds made by the work may integrate into the objects “like a permanent footprint [that stays] there forever.”⁴⁹ Galindo himself has linked his own practice to *rasquachismo*, stating how reutilizing discarded objects is tied to spiritual mending and exploratory methods for cultural survival. Moreover, the artist is aware of how the sculpture remains as a testament, an artifact, of the healing that took place.

The intersection between art and music is perhaps unexpected for this kind of transformational possibilities. Yet this music provides a means for such events to rupture through silence, meant to ring through viewer’s bodies.⁵⁰ The recycling of such unique objects fills any silence or stillness with the presence of “another being, another object...that lives inside our bodies.”⁵¹ The artist himself has spoken to the efficacy of the sonic devices: even when at a standstill, Galindo affirms their place within museums, claiming that they are sacred objects.⁵² In fact, one journal likens the artworks to the traditions of relics and reliquaries, where “objects, fragments of life, of the body [are] imbued in perpetuity with the spirit that once animated the possessor.”⁵³

Unique to Galindo’s musical and sculptural practice is the evocation of a Mesoamerican past. In the 2000s, Galindo learned of the meeting point between music and healing, primarily

⁴⁹Erickson et al, “Conversation: Guillermo Galindo and Josh Kun,” in *When Home Won’t Let You Stay: Migration through Contemporary Art*, 107.

⁵⁰Guillermo Galindo, “Sonic Border” in *Border Cantos: Richard Misrach | Guillermo Galindo* (New York: Aperture, 2016), 194.

⁵¹Erickson and Respini, 109.

⁵²NPR, “Lost — Then Found — Along The Border, Objects Become Art,” 2014.

<https://www.npr.org/2014/11/22/365937723/lost-then-found-along-the-border-objects-become-art>

⁵³“Border Cantos.” *Western Humanities Review* 70, no. 2 (2016): 142.

because of Mesoamerica. Mexica cultures believed that every object has a soul, full of experiences that make each item sacred.⁵⁴ Furthermore, while the piñata has various suspected origins, one includes the Aztec, or Mexica, tradition that involved a ritual to honor a central deity named Huitzilopochtli. During the ritual, a “feather-covered pot was filled with small treasures and hit with a stick so that its contents spilled at the feet of the idol.”⁵⁵ To this day, piñatas are a common feature of Mexican birthdays and other celebrations. Now made with cardboard, newspaper, tissue paper, and variations of glue, the piñata is built hollow and dried, then suspended and filled with candy and other favors for party guests. The piñata is commonly made as a star shaped form, with its triangular peaks protruding around its spherical base with streamers attached on its surface, floating throughout the air as it dances around. These rotating motions are not unlike the gestural movements in Galindo’s performances.

While not all the Border Cantos sculptures take on lives of objects used in Mexica tradition, they do all recall the importance of sound and internal transformation found within Indigenous rituals. Furthermore, emerging scholarship on sound and embodiment signifies this material significance. Music theorists Rebecca Rinsema and Jashen Edwards propose that sound and music signal the tensions at play in human experience. The authors propose how musical meaning is generated through feeling, sensation, memory—each of which are the embodied elements of human lived experience. While the authors explore everyday sounds and electronic music in particular, their explorations establish sound and music as communications of emotions, and actions, with an ability to “undermine...held beliefs about...groups of people, ideas, or

⁵⁴Jill Furst and Leslie McKeever, “The Yolia And The Soul” in *The Natural History of the Soul in Ancient Mexico*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1995), 18-20.

⁵⁵José Antonio Burciaga, *Drink Cultura: Chicanismo* (Santa Barbara: Joshua Odell Editions, Capra Press, 1993), 76.

things.”⁵⁶ In combination with embodied movements to make sound, music can result in sent and received political messages. The authors claim that notions of asymmetry are communicated through strategies such as tension and release, pitch, and pressure in the rhythm of musical compositions. Thus, even for individuals who are not immigrants themselves, the sounds made by socio-politically charged materials can indeed offer a different kind of transformation taking place with and through their senses.

This approach brings forward a compelling question: who needs to be healed? We can assume that the need for healing emerges from an exposure to violence, perfected on shooting ranges and utilized when deemed necessary against those who attempt to cross illegally. As the previous artworks have suggested, the outcomes of border operations do not only affect immigrants, but also their loved ones and those who live with similar immigrant status. In Galindo’s performances, healing becomes an act predicated on the senses—hearing, seeing, and experiencing to then move forward.

For the artist, to bridge the reconciliation of cultural traumas with an ancient Indigenous practice speaks to the necessities to understand a border crossing as an embodied reality. The history of Mexico’s colonization has increasingly shaped discourse surrounding Mexican and American land sovereignty. Through politics, religion, and violence, Mesoamerica’s land and people changed forever, becoming a hybrid state of Spanish and Indigenous. By conjuring this past through its instrumental purpose, Galindo suggests that something equally imperial and violent is ongoing within the borderland region. This land, once belonging to Mexico, has undergone various physical and political revisions, but the consequences of this remain

⁵⁶Rebecca Rinsema and Jashen Edwards, "Exploring Sonic Meaning and Embodiment in Human Cultural Transmission from a Pedagogical Perspective," *Frontiers in Communication* 6 (2021): 3.

unacknowledged. The effects of a border and its operations, however, linger for those it displaces and attempts to keep out.

To assert the border as a sonic entity suggests that the border is not passively traversed. Instead, it is activated with optical, audio, and spatial conditions within an immigrant's field of perception. In fact, one exhibition review notes how Galindo attempts to "embody [immigrant's] existence through song."⁵⁷ The artist even utilized shell casings to fashion himself ankle bells for use in the Border Canto, further immersing his own body to help perform the *limpias*.⁵⁸ While studying oral history and performance in Southern African borderlands, historian Angela Impey argues that sound, song, and music-making draws attention to the evocation of the self and place by communities displaced by borders and their subsequent social and economic developments. Though the Nguni women throughout the southern African regions played music collectively, their songs were cultural expressions, now transformed into oral histories. For Galindo, he traces Mexican trauma to its origins, collapsing time and distance between ancestors and descendants, to bring their methods to the present day. The way to endure, even overcome, cultural trauma is through culturally specific practices. The immaterial qualities of his music reconcile the concern and shock brought forth by the material composition of his sonic devices.⁵⁹

Yet the materials of these sculptures speak again to Galindo's intentions. For music theorists Steffen Lepa, Anne-Kathrin Hoklas, Hauke Egermann, and Stefan Weinzierl, a musician's decisions impact the entirety of instrumental performances, arguing that "the material audio media technologies employed during music...form a constitutive and modulating aspect"

⁵⁷Randi Lynn Tanglen, Review of *Border Cantos: Sight & Sound Explorations from the Mexican-American Border*, *The Public Historian* 39, no. 4 (2017): 147. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/26421019>.

⁵⁸Brenda J. Brown, Review of *Border Cantos: Richard Misrach | Guillermo Galindo*, *Landscape Journal: design, planning, and management of the land* 35, no. 2 (2016): 309. muse.jhu.edu/article/669295.

⁵⁹Angela Impey, "Sound, Memory and Dis/placement: Exploring Sound, Song and Performance as Oral History in the Southern African Borderlands," *Oral History (Colchester)* 36, no. 1 (2008): 33-44.

of each performance.⁶⁰ Applying their framework, Galindo demonstrates a kind of musical expertise by exhibiting his own embodied knowledge about “how, where, and when to use suitable material artifacts and their varying technological functions to realize the different personal aesthetic and social purposes intended by listening” to Galindo's performances.⁶¹

It is no secret that violence occurs at the border—on land, in the air, and across rivers. Like Cabrera, Galindo is concerned with what specificities are to be found at the border. It is a heavily militarized zone with weapons and technology that is often aimed at racialized bodies. Violence is an act perfected through training, with bullets fired into practice targets and, seemingly, unlawful bodies alike. Finding the shells amidst the landscape of the border creates discordance between the land and the man-made structures found within it—not just the border wall, but the shooting range, the bullets, the targets. By reworking these materials, Galindo’s sonic devices importantly activate the senses to mend the impact of violence.

Embodying a Border Crossing

The sculptures by Cabrera, Ontiveros, and Galindo are born out of modern art developments, both sculptural and cultural. Their works are alike in their emphasis on materiality, but their strategies and their subject matter reveal the complexities of border operations. The border is characterized by its location and its risks, as Cabrera highlights. Yet, Ontiveros’ sculpture reveals that it is not bound to this location, reaching individuals within the United States and revoking agency. The outstanding trauma of these events compels Galindo’s sonic devices, reworking the devastating into the sacred and leaving behind the evidence. At the

⁶⁰Steffen Lepa, Anne-Kathrin Hoklas, Hauke Egermann, and Stefan Weinzierl. "Sound, Materiality and Embodiment Challenges for the Concept of ‘Musical Expertise’ in the Age of Digital Mediatization," *Convergence (London, England)* 21, no. 3 (2015): 294-300.

⁶¹Ibid., 296.

core of each artist's sculpture is empathy for the immigrant, tracing their movements and their experiences for viewers to behold.

But the inclusion of such complicated materials speaks to concerns that are pertinent to immigration studies and discourse: embodiment and trauma. The combination of embodied viewing and materiality reinforce one another to highlight the lived experiences imposed by the border. These frameworks stem from the act of border crossings themselves. Crossing requires of its participants incredible alertness to the physical landscape, which presents its own dangers, and the border operations that can impact the crossing, legal or otherwise. The body must endure the emotional, political, and physical ramifications of crossing the border. For those unruly crossers, the stakes are high. I have already underscored the potential of state violence to the body deployed by weapons and surveillance, but there are other possibilities: suffocation, or asphyxiation from carbon monoxide poisoning, dehydration, inability to relieve bowels or bladders, overheating and heat stroke, sexual violence, discomfort and claustrophobia, humiliation, and suicide.

Furthermore, in their analysis of Mexican and Central American immigration, Sheridan and McGuire categorize embodied risk through various stages to account for an individual's personal experiences. The first is their lived experiences within their home countries that for whatever reason moved them to immigrate. The second is the sets of risks their bodies undergo as they reach the border, and the last is the racial and economic conditions of U.S. society that molds their subjectivities. These experts are not alone in these provocations, as numerous immigration studies experts have analyzed the lasting effects of immigration on the body and

mind.⁶² The second and third instances are most reflected in the work of each artist. Galindo's instruments literally reflect and redirect the risks of violence at the border, with its militarized weapons and border agents. In Ontiveros' selection of one specific individual and his deportation, viewers bear witness to how immigrant lives, even with legal permissions to remain in the U.S., reflect certain economic and racial positionalities. Cabrera's series of soft sculptures, true to their name, are situated between these stages as immigrants share details regarding the actual crossing and how their lives are impacted by that crossing.

By establishing embodiment as a concept applied to migration and immigrant studies, I aim to draw parallels with the embodied viewing of these sculptures. Shifting from conceptualizations of the borderlands solely as a site, the works by Cabrera, Galindo, and Ontiveros conceptualize the border differently. The artists distinguish the border as an encounter: proceeding from the actual crossing into the present, causing emotional and psychological hardships that transcend beyond its location. As Sheridan and McGuire explain it, "the experience of border crossing is not a single event but rather a journey with lifelong consequences."⁶³ For Cabrera, the many traumatic emotions and narratives that immigrant communities hold within themselves are directly tied to the border's site and its landscape. In Ontiveros' sculpture, the forced removal of an immigrant body and its transportation to Mexico is embedded in the complications and precariousness of the belongings. For Galindo's performances and their remaining sculptures, the dangers involved in border crossings may result

⁶²Mellissa Wright, "Necropolitics, Border Walls, and a Murder of Jim and Juan Crows in the Americas," *Critical Philosophy of Race* 12 (2024): 24-50.; Krista M. Perreira and India Ornelas, "Painful Passages: Traumatic Experiences and Post-Traumatic Stress among Immigrant Latino Adolescents and their Primary Caregivers," *The International Migration Review* 47, no. 4 (2013): 976-1005.; John D. Marquez, "Latinos as the "Living Dead": Raciality, Expendability, and Border Militarization," *Latino Studies* 10, no. 4 (2012): 473-498.; Ana Gutiérrez Garza, "The Temporality of Illegality: Experiences of Undocumented Latin American Migrants in London," *Focaal* 2018, no. 81 (2018): 86-98.

⁶³Sheridan and McGuire, 5.

not just in the firing of bullets towards those crossings but also in the need for reconciling this violence with culturally specific practices.

These contemporary sculptures emit an essence, carried between border terrain into the art galleries. Their engagement with the nature of border crossings and life afterwards is sensorial, articulating subjectivities through materiality and embodied viewing. The transformation of found or loaned materials is grounded in aesthetics and interested in providing empirical evidence of state-sanctioned violence. These artworks, made throughout the 2010s, respond to critical political moments tied to direct places and even individuals. In communicating their concern for immigration processes, the artists reveal the tumult of present-day politics. They are significant contributions to Latinx art, extending and expanding Mexican/Mexican-American art aesthetics.

More crucially, in line with Dávila's analysis, these Latinx artists have a transnational and expansive presence that centers anti-racist practices and brings visibility to migrants' rights.⁶⁴ As these artworks tour the country in exhibitions for over the past decade, they translate the experiences of border crossings and their outstanding, unresolved impact on immigrant lives, perhaps even to museum audiences that have no experience with the border. In viewing these artworks, viewers must position themselves in relation to the sculptures physically and socially. For museums and galleries where one views these sculptures, we may look at their operations as contact zones, which Mary Louise Pratt classified as "the space of colonial encounters, the spaces in which peoples geographically and historically separated come into contact with each other."⁶⁵ Those "separated" personal accounts are laid bare, such as the narratives found within

⁶⁴Dávila, 8.

⁶⁵Mary Louise Pratt, *Imperial Eyes: Travel Writing and Transculturation* (London; New York: Routledge, 2008), 6-7.

Cabrera's soft sculptures, and the critical sculptural materials relay asymmetrical power between nation and migrant.

Furthermore, in Stuart Hall's analysis of the postcolonial turn, he describes how global art production generates visual representations "rewritten from the margins...to give voice to the marginalized, the migrant, the endlessly mobile, the homeless."⁶⁶ Cabrera's collaborations are the first-person representation of this revisionist approach. For Ontiveros, he spotlighted the results of a postcolonial and globalized world manifested in materials left behind in the wake of deportation. Similarly, Galindo's sculptures can activate to give an actual voice to nameless border crossers. In bringing together nontraditional materials, these artists are outlining these buried histories from what art historian Terry Smith describes as the "fragmented strangeness that is all around us."⁶⁷ In using these literal fragments derived from U.S. border operations, these artists question the nature of surveillance, security, and justifications of current U.S.-Mexico border operations.

Their hopes to generate empathy and change are ongoing. At nearly 2000 miles long, the U.S.-Mexico border is one of the most traveled borders in the world. Since 9/11, U.S. border operations have become more disturbing. Contemporary art critically responds to the conditions of its time. Yet while these artworks were created in the 2010s, there has been little change in the way border conditions create a chasm between nation and migrant.⁶⁸ In the last few years, migrants arriving in the U.S. have become cargo, transported on buses to sanctuary cities

⁶⁶Stuart Hall, "Changing States: In the Shadow of Empire" in *Contemporary Art and Ideas in an Era of Globalisation* (Institute of International Visual Arts, 2004), 80-88.

⁶⁷Terry Smith, *What is Contemporary Art?* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009), 235.

⁶⁸"Texas Transports Over 100,000 Migrants To Sanctuary Cities," 2024. Accessed March 30, 2024.

<https://gov.texas.gov/news/post/texas-transport-over-100000-migrants-to-sanctuary-cities>

Incriminating photos of Border Patrol agents circulated worldwide, documenting them chasing after refugees on horseback and using excessive force to push them into the Rio Grande.⁶⁹

Saw-bladed buoys glide along the surface of the Rio Grande in Texas along with miles of razor wire installed along land to discourage border crossings, initially challenged by state courts but later allowed by a federal court.⁷⁰ These uniforms worn by these Border Patrol agents might one day make their way into Cabrera's soft sculptures. These immigrants bussed from city to city may be removed from the country altogether, leaving their possession behind in the shuffle for others to encounter, as exemplified by Ontiveros' work. The buoys and razor wire will one day be worn down by the river's current, perhaps turned into an instrument of healing like Galindo's sonic devices for the benefit, not the detriment, of immigrants and their loved ones.

The will to revise immigrant journeys lives on. The border systems which influenced the art of this thesis are not isolated but paralleled among other powerful nations. This research is limited in its survey of embodied dynamics for individuals between Mexico and the United States. While this thesis tackles specific art histories within Latinx art and a distinct geo-political terrain in North America, migration is a global phenomenon. Tackling the violent responses to immigration grows more complex when one considers the historical and regional specificities that inspire immigration. Art alone cannot solve the humanitarian crises rupturing in borderlands worldwide. But it does provide a critical opportunity for immigration to manifest within our field of perception, even if we are miles from these borders.

⁶⁹“DHS report says some Border Patrol agents used unnecessary force on Haitians at Texas border, but didn't whip them,” *NBC*, 2022. Accessed March 30, 2024. <https://www.nbcnews.com/politics/immigration/dhs-report-says-border-patrol-agents-used-unnecessary-force-haitians-t-rcna36992>

⁷⁰William Melhado And Uriel J. García “Texas can keep buoys in the Rio Grande while legal challenge continues, federal appeals court rules,” *Texas Tribune*, September 6, 2023, <https://www.texastribune.org/2023/09/06/texas-border-floating-barrier-buoys-federal-judge-ruling/>.

To embody something denotes processes: to make concrete and perceptible; to include or contain something as a constituent part. Art historian Christine Ross characterizes art informed by immigrant experiences as a set of interpellating calls that prompt a viewer to modify their assumptions, to dismantle unequal coexistence and build equal relations.⁷¹ The artwork of Cabrera, Ontiveros, and Galindo, calls viewers to center empathy, responsibility, and storytelling to create coexistence.⁷² Should these calls be answered, it may be possible to embody the qualities—empathy, goodwill, sameness—to transform immigrant futures.

⁷¹Christine Ross, *Art for Coexistence: Unlearning the Way we See Migration* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: The MIT Press, 2022), 16.

⁷²Ibid, 16.

Figures



Figure 1. Guillermo Galindo, *Shell Piñata/Piñata de casquillos*, 2014. Art Bridges.



Figure 2. Margarita Cabrera, *Nopal (Sara Hernandez)*, 2016. Photo by Mike Lundgren.



Figure 3. Camilo Ontiveros, *Temporary Storage: The Personal Property of Juan Manuel Montes*, 2017. Photo from the artist's website.



Figure 4. Judy Baca, "Mrs. Laws of South Central, L.A. Fights Housing Discrimination" from the *Great Wall of Los Angeles*, 1976. Photo from Hyperallergic.

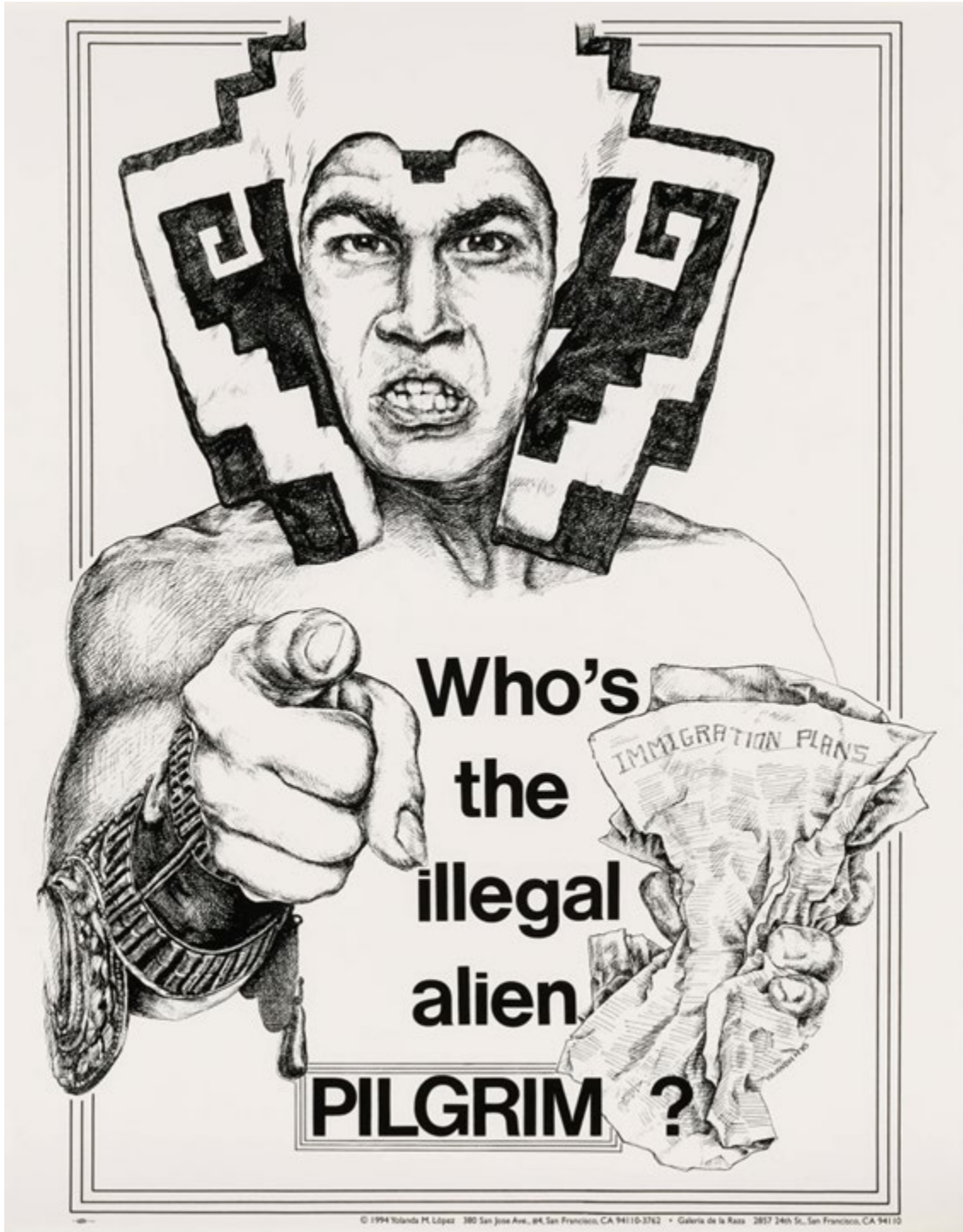


Figure 5. Yolanda López, *Who's the Illegal Alien, Pilgrim?*, 1981. Smithsonian American Art Museum.



Figure 6. Rupert García, *¡Cesen Deportación!*, 1973. National Gallery of Art.

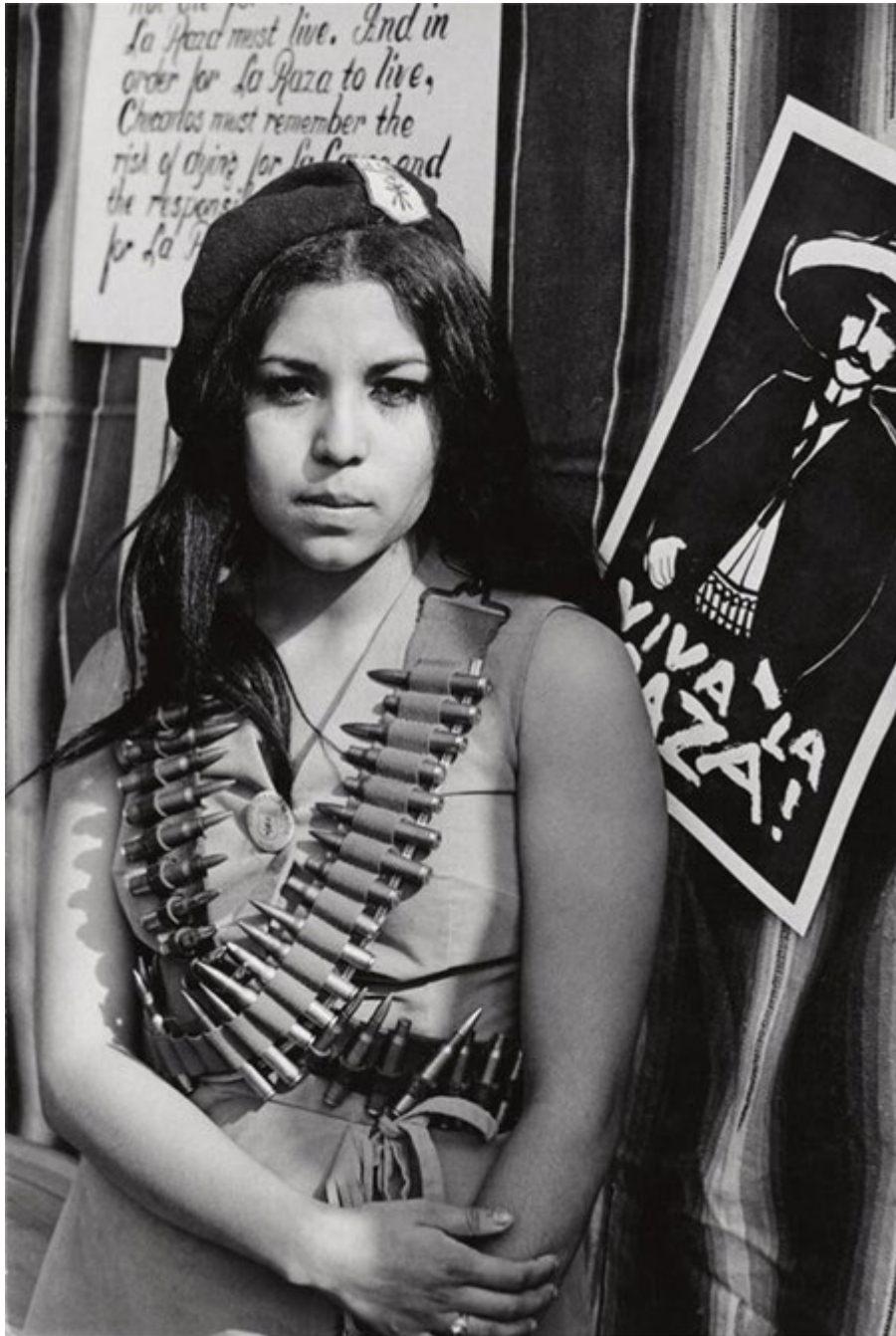


Figure 7. George Rodriguez, *Hilda Reyes Jensen, Lincoln Heights*, 1969. Los Angeles City Historical Society.



Figure 8. Eduardo Abaroa, *Portable Broken Obelisk for Outdoor Markets*, 1991–93. Photo from Kurimanzutto Gallery.



Figure 9. Installation of *Space in Between* at the Desert Botanical Garden's Ottosen Gallery, 2016. Image from *Terremoto Magazine*.



Figure 10. Margarita Cabrera, *Space in Between - Saguaro*, 2016. In collaboration with Guadalupe Aragon. Jane Lombard Gallery.



Figure 11. Margarita Cabrera, *Space in Between: Carrizos (Teresa Sanchez Garay)*, 2010. Photo from the McNay Museum of Art, San Antonio, Texas.



Figure 12. Camilo Ontiveros, *Temporary Storage: The Personal Property of Juan Manuel Montes*, 2017. Photography by Irfan Khan for the Los Angeles Times.



Figure 13. Detail. Camilo Ontiveros, *Temporary Storage: The Belongings of Juan Manuel Montes*, 2017. *When Home Won't Let You Stay: Migration through Contemporary Art*, the Institute of Contemporary Art, Boston, 2019.



Figure 14. Camilo Ontiveros, *Temporary Storage*, 2009. Photograph from the Los Angeles Times.



Figure 15. Installation shot of *Shell Piñata*. Photograph by Patrick Tehan for Bay Area News Group.

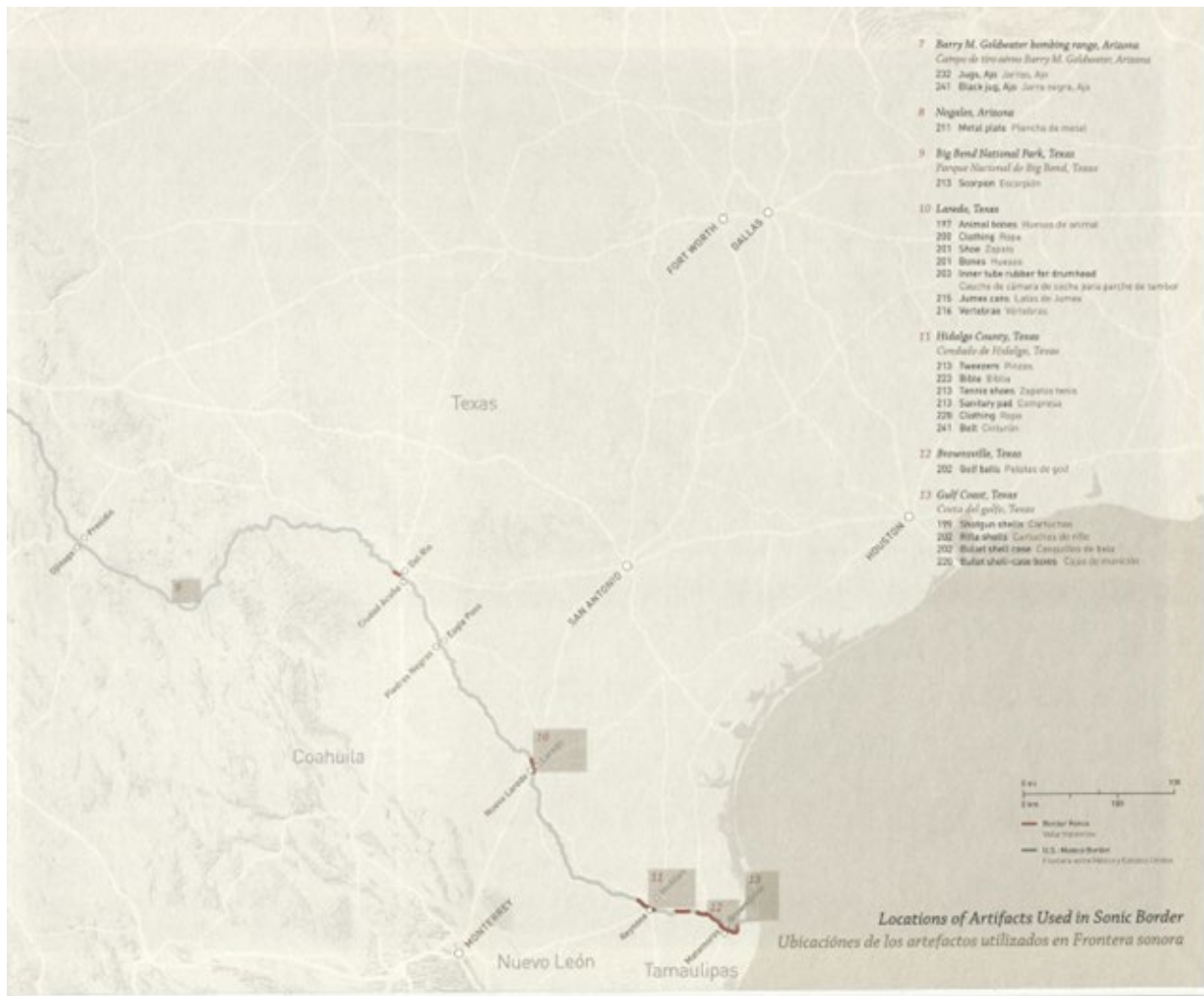


Figure 16. A map of locations of selected artifacts. From *Richard Misrach and Guillermo Galindo: Border Cantos*, 2016.



Figure 17. Still of Guillermo Galindo playing *Shell Piñata*. From “*Guillermo Galindo: Limpia | Cleansing*,” Youtube, 2016.

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ABSTRACT

Embodying Borderlands: Material Practices in Contemporary Latinx Sculptures

by
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Since the 1960s, artists have created artwork in response to the U.S.-Mexico border. Throughout the late 20th century, both the United States and Mexico, artists used a variety of mediums to communicate social, political, and geographical concerns, such as printmaking, muralism, photography, installation art. Many of these concerns have endured into the present day, though there is a shift in mediums and methods through which these issues enter the contemporary art world.

In my thesis, I explore the material components of sculptures by Margarita Cabrera, Camilo Ontiveros and Guillermo Galindo— artists of Mexican descent now living and working in the United States. Their artwork details the lived experiences of migrants and their loved ones as they are affected by policy, violence, and the government agencies that oversee their legal status in the United States. Their artworks incorporate various found, loaned, and reused materials including empty bullet casings found along the border, border patrol uniforms, and the personal property of a young DACA recipient who was deported in 2017. By tracing the threads of materiality, embodiment, and political resonance, my thesis analyzes how their artworks negotiate trauma, violence, and survival. Moreover, their works conceptualize migration itself as an embodied experience through three dimensional conditions.