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In Lieu of Unity En Lugar de la Unidad Ballroom Marfa

By Stephan Pascher

MARFA

Anyone making the trek to Marfa will find it difficult to ignore the steady flow of Border Patrol wagons through the town. Some 700 agents roam the mountains and prairies of the 165,000-square-mile Marfa sector. The number one employer in Presidio County is the U.S. Department of Homeland Security, whose Customs and Border Patrol headquarters is located next to Donald Judd's Chinati Foundation. At Ballroom Marfa, "In Lieu of Unity/En Lugar de la Unidad," organized by Alicia Ritson, brought together 10 Mexican-born artists or artist groups who addressed the particular social and political realities of this border region.

A dozen clay pots containing cloth cacti sewn from bits of drab green Border Patrol uniforms dominated Ballroom's main gallery. The work, *Space In Between* (2010), was made by Margarita Cabrera along with nine Mexican women, all immigrants living in Houston's East End. The imitation nopales, agaves and other desert succulents were embroidered with images of their makers' journey—women in native dress, mesquite, desert willows and agents hunting through brush with helicopters buzzing overhead. The potted cacti serve as a reminder of the risky trek but also convey the communal bond that unites its survivors. The piece sets traditional collective (women's) labor against the economic policies that control immigration, and the maquiladora assembly plants dotting northern Mexico.

Nearby, a small flat-screen displayed the most modest, lyrical and conceptually complex work in the show: Mario García Torres's *An Open Letter to Dr. Atl* (2005). The film is a 6-minute pan across Barranca di Oblatos, a deserted canyon near Guadalajara. A voiceover in Spanish recites a letter to Gerardo Murillo, a politically active modernist who made paintings of the Barranca in the 1940s and '50s, using the pseudonym Dr. Atl. The speaker ponders the picturesque landscape, while soliciting Atl's thoughts on the prospect of opening a Guggenheim Museum there. The work rather wistfully suggests that cultural tourism and globalization in art are insensitive to place, providing economic concessions while introducing foreign influence.

For the video projection *Irrigation* (2010), Teresa Margolles, who represented Mexico at the last Venice Biennale, placed moistened cloths at various locations in Juarez where drug-war murders occurred. Bodily matter and other debris adhered to the fabric; the material was then dissolved in 5,000 gallons of water, pumped into an irrigation truck and sprayed along a stretch of Highway 90 passing through Marfa. The video documented the drive. Margolles's act literally transports the violence 200 miles to the site of the exhibition, implicating viewers in the proximate narcotics war.



Pedro Reyes's *Palas por pistolas* (Shovels for Handguns) focused on cartel-heavy Culaicán in Sinaloa, where, since 2008, Reyes has been offering merchandise coupons in exchange for weapons. The weapons are melted into spades, which are then used to plant trees, a play on the Biblical transformation of swords into plowshares. At Ballroom, Reyes displayed one such shovel alongside a potted Arizona Ash, to be planted nearby at the conclusion of the exhibition.

Other works take on related themes, though with less political bite. To the show's credit, the artists all engaged borderland concerns not with the didacticism of much "political art" but through a heightened attention to the poetics of materials, formal invention and avoidance of ethnographic cliché. In lieu of a homogenous portrait of community, or of the resistances that community might produce, the exhibition presented independent voices that speak from not necessarily unique personal experiences.

Photo: View of the exhibition "In Lieu of Unity/En Lugar de la Unidad," showing (foreground) Margarita Cabrera's *Space in Between*, 2010; at Ballroom Marfa.