

“Migration”
Columbia City Gallery May 20 – July 5, 2015
Curator’s Statement by Susan Noyes Platt

Immigrants arrive in the United States with hopes of a better life. Coming from Guatemala, Nicaragua, Mexico, they are driven to leave their homes by the forces of free trade and climate change, by gang warfare, and drug mafias. They cross harsh deserts by train and foot into the United States. Our farms require the hard work of Latino laborers, too hard for most of us. Because of their undocumented status, they are exploited, underpaid, ill housed, and abused on the job. Capitalism invites them in, and then beats them down. Our country offers no path to legal status for migrant workers, so they are often detained for minor offenses in harsh conditions, and then deported, frequently leaving family behind.

But resistance to these abuses is ever more visible. Berry pickers working for Sakuma Brothers Berry Farm in Skagit County have demanded their rights with strikes and boycotts, DREAMERS, those young people who came here as children and are now allowed temporary status to attend college, have made undocumented people visible without fear, immigration activists are offering pro bono defense to detainees. Everywhere the awareness of the situation with migration is increasing.

This exhibition is part of my ongoing “Migration Project” to make migration visible through art. I invited three artists to offer personal perspectives on migration. Each of them is aware of the larger forces and abuses at work, but each of them is working from their own experiences and political perspectives.

Tatiana Garmendia confronts her own childhood experience of detention and immigration. Born in Havana, Cuba in 1961 to a family of active supporters of socialism, they greeted Castro with delight. As a doctor, Tatiana’s father joined the army and worked in rural communities. But, not long after, political conditions became convoluted and he fell into disfavor. Tatiana’s family went into a detention camp in 1966 where they remained for almost three years. As a young child, Tatiana witnessed atrocities and rape. Her father was tortured and disabled. They finally reached the US in the fall of 1969.

Tatiana has only now been able to begin to explore these painful memories. She draws on references to the Tarot and Santeria as a way to access her feelings. Some of her references are very specific, such as her experience sorting coffee beans as a child during the years she was in detention. Others are exploring the contradiction of Castro’s charisma and the realities she experienced. The painful contradiction of myth and reality are embodied in her dance with a skeleton, invoking a child who entertained her in the camp with a performance for which he was later tortured. She refers to human trafficking in another video using her own body.

Cecilia Alvarez was shaped by her childhood on the border of Mexico, in both San Diego and Tijuana. In Mexico she experienced a warm extended family at her grandmother’s home. She spoke Spanish and connected to the long history of her community. In the U.S., she was forced to speak English and stripped of her cultural values. She remembers that Latino students were lectured on hygiene in elementary school, while white American students took art.

As a radical feminist Chicana/Cubana artist, Alvarez declares her resistance to the capitalist war on Latinos, as well as her belief in the powerful female energy that stands up to torture, trafficking, and environmental degradation. *Los Eternos Sacrificios, Eternal Sacrifices* confronts us with a larger than life nude female with stigmata on her hands, protecting her unborn child. In *La Tierra Santa, Holy Earth*, a defiant mother, hair flying behind her, gestures *stop* with her outturned palm. Three children of the Brazilian Yanomamö tribe stand behind her: at the bottom of the painting the span of her legs protects a

duck, panther, turtle, fish and snake. This indigenous woman is protecting her progeny and the creatures of the earth. Indigenous lands are often the target of multinational companies, forcing their migration. But indigenous peoples are also vocal participants in current resistance movements. Alvarez's painting honors them.

The third painting is the centerpiece of an altar dedicated to her father, Jorge Guillermo Alvarez, who came from Cuba to the US in the 1940s in hopes of earning a better living. As an albacore fisherman he respected the environment, he refused to use nets. Environmental consciousness is a deep component of Alvarez's work.

The installation of crosses movingly addresses the price of resistance, of migration, both on individuals and on the planet with the following texts:

"In memory of all the species that have lost or are losing habitat, a future, and have nowhere to migrate

"In memory of all those known and unknown who have perished trying to migrate and escape violence

"In memory to the women and children known and unknown who are fleeing natural and social catastrophe and who are victims of slavery"

Deborah Lawrence grew up in Southern California with working class parents who had deep roots in activism and left wing politics. She moved constantly as a child; art was her means of survival. She works with collage in the tradition of Dada artists who intentionally cut up magazines as a way of attacking capitalism. Her art work is defiant and straightforward, but also humorous and respectful. She engages directly with social injustice.

Lucia E tells the story of a Filipina immigrant who fled the Marcos dictatorship and then followed a successful path in this country as a result of community support and her ability to speak English. *Resist Hate Map*, based on information from the Southern Poverty Law Center, makes visual the astounding numbers of hate groups in the US. It offers to partner to the vast detention system, the two ideologies going hand in hand. *Welcome* details that system, its private corporate ownership, its absurd and arbitrary regulations, and its abuse of human rights. *American Amnesty Tray* highlights the Native American Council action granting amnesty to 240 million illegal white people.

Each artist offers multiple perspectives on migration ranging from the torture and abuse of detention, human trafficking, environmental degradation, and the corrosive role of capitalism, to the hopes and dreams for a better life, that, in some cases, are realized. "Migration" encompasses all of these issues and much more. It encompasses all of us.



Tatiana Garmendia
Mi Patria Querida



Cecilia Alvarez
La Tierra Santa



Deborah Lawrence
Lucia E Tray

