

Art & Object

An Art Talk With Fiber Artist Consuelo J. Underwood



COURTESY OF THE OAKLAND MUSEUM OF CALIFORNIA

"Undocumented Tales of the Future: Now", Installation view, 2024, Artpace Residency, San Antonio, Texas

Pioneering fiber artist and weaver Consuelo J. Underwood is known for breaking boundaries—integrating barbed wire, caution signs, religious iconography, botanical imagery, and astronomy into tapestries and installations—weaving together history, identity, resistance, and resilience.

The daughter of migrant agricultural workers—a Chicana mother and a father of Huichol Indian descent—Underwood draws attention to the humane and ecological costs of artificial borders. Now retired, the former San Jose State University professor jokes she should be knitting at home, but has not slowed down.

Underwood continues to empower and inspire students, artists, and viewers with her innovative exhibitions, as well as through speaking engagements and outreach programs. *Art & Object* sat down with the artist to talk about her art and inspirations.

Megan D. Robinson: How did you choose textiles and fabric art as your artistic focus?

Consuelo J. Underwood: As a child, I realized that attire indicated class and cultural status. In Mexico, the lowest was the *rebozo*, which only an Indian woman, begging, would wear. In the U.S., it was the agricultural workers' clothes.

I knew from day one, because of the former status I had as a farmworker, when others walked, I had to run, where others run, I had to fly, where others fly, I had to soar. I knew that to succeed and get out of the rut of agriculture and poverty and being anonymous, I had to play the game, I had to infiltrate. I realized in entering academia, that our culture is defined by our threads—as in “Nice threads!” And what we wear is literally made of threads.

Later, as a student in the late seventies, I was surprised that even in the crafts, textiles had a contextual hierarchy of rank and importance.



PHOTO CREDIT: FINGER PHOTOGRAPHY

Headshot of Consuelo



COURTESY OF THE ARTIST AND ARTSPACE

Divine Homecoming, 2024, Digital Print on vinyl, safety pins, beads, cotton, and synthetic fabric, 13' x 13'

Weaving was at the bottom of the whole craft pyramid. What is the issue? If they accept clay, glass, machinery, photography as art—why not thread yet? With Van Gogh on my side, and all the ancient ladies (ancestral weavers), I said, I'm going to do it with thread.

I was the only [fabric arts] student, at both San Diego State and San Jose. It was so much fun! I felt invincible. They didn't know how to critique my work. I was doing things that were way beyond what anybody else was doing: barbed wire, fine silk, and a vision of the Earth, the Moon, and the cosmos.

They hired me as a teacher—a tenured professor— even before I graduated.

MDR: Remind me why you like Van Gogh so much.

CJU: Well, first of all, I enjoyed that he tried to capture that other side of reality. Secondly—his tragic story. Thirdly, he decided to go live with the poorest of the poor—the weavers—because they were displaced. His early paintings were of weavers. When I get in trouble with color, I'll have a quiet moment and reflect on his work and his thoughts, or on the ancient ladies. And it gets resolved. It's so empowering to link up with history.

MDR: You deal a lot with immigration and how our artificial borders affect the natural flow of people, animals, and plant species—why do you think that is important?



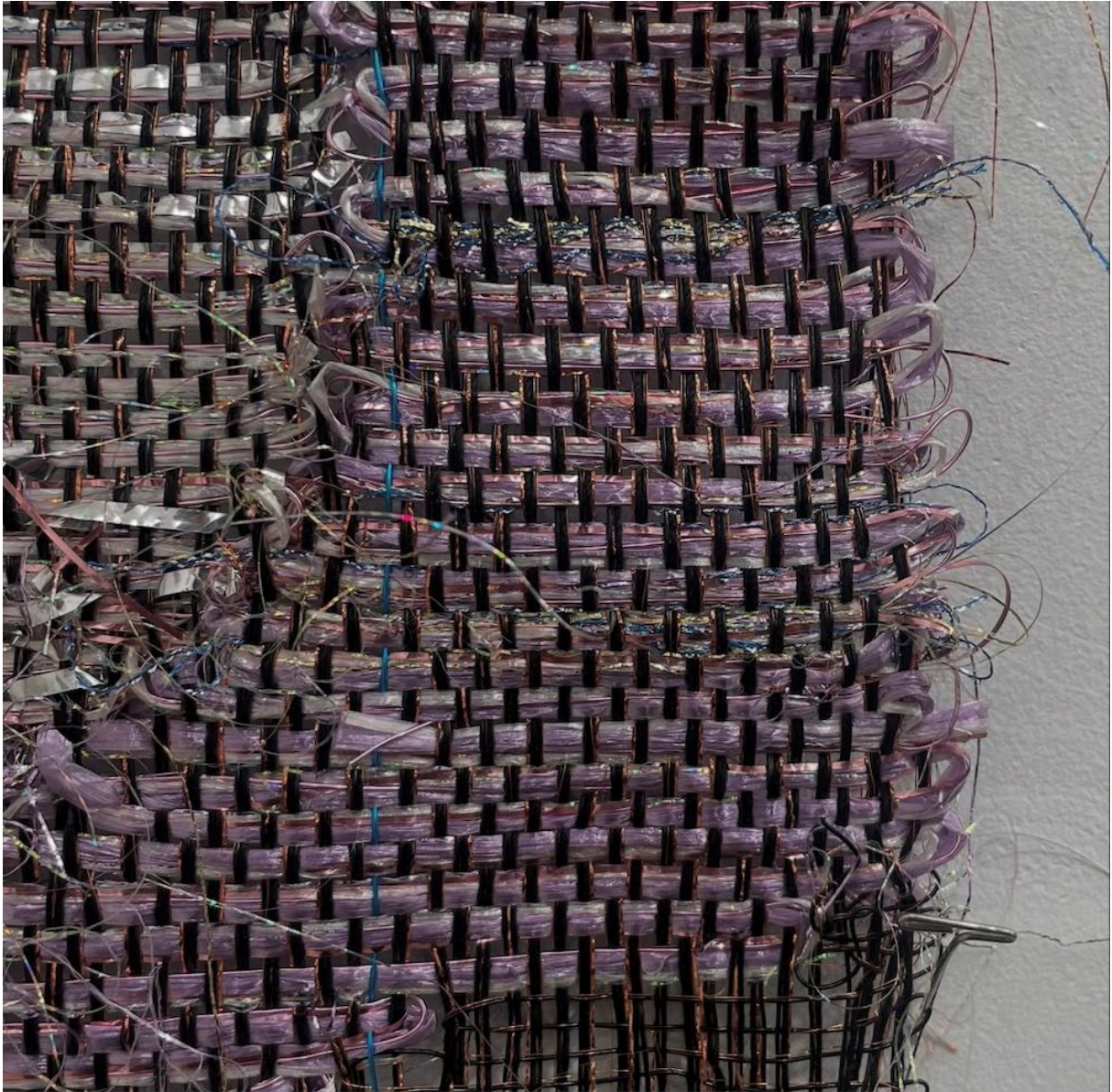
COURTESY OF THE ARTIST AND ARTSPACE

Planetary Expedition, Undocumented, 2024, Textile paint, linen, cotton, silk threads, copper, steel and barbed wire, 55" x 16"

CJU: I felt that I was obligated. Because I was blessed to be born in Sacramento, California, I didn't have the issues that my father did. In the Southwest, we say, "We don't cross those borders, the borders are crossing us." So, that's always been a battle cry in my soul and my spirit. Until that fence goes down, I'm not going to give it up.

MDR: Has there been an evolution of your materials?

CJU: Just lately, with the cartwheel galaxy I've been working on, I've used aluminum wire. It's really beautiful. It's fine. It's different colors, and it holds its shape. But I still use linen, cotton, or silk, which have beautiful voices of their own, and I still work with barbed wire, leather barbed wire, the other metallic wires, and flowers. I have my basic vocabulary or alphabet, I just added aluminum to the fold.



COURTESY OF THE ARTIST, PHOTO BY ROSE SALSEDA

Details from Cartwheel Galaxy

MDR: Do you feel like art is particularly important right now?

CJU: Of course, more than ever. Utopia is, when it comes down to it, the freedom to create. Right now, artists still have that freedom. So, right now is when you create the most, because your freedoms are in danger. Do it now! Create. Anything that helps affect the world in a positive way. And if you're afraid to say it, code it, because people aren't stupid, they decipher code. It's so important right now.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Megan D. Robinson writes for Art & Object and the Iowa Source.