ICONS

Consuelo Jimenez Underwood

FOLLOW THE THREADS

Consuelo Jimenez Underwood weaves her way through the complexities of the US-Mexico border.

by Maximiliano Durón

portrait by Damon Casarez

Consuelo Jimenez Underwood weaving in her studio in Gualala, Calif.

In 2009 Consuelo Jimenez Underwood was confronted by a blank wall. She had been invited to participate in a group exhibition at the Triton Museum of Art in Santa Clara, California, titled "Xicana: Spiritual Reflections/Reflexiones Espirituales." As a textile artist, she wasn't sure if she should fill the wall with small- and medium-size weavings or something much larger. She had never worked at the scale of a museum wall before, but she took the opportunity as a challenge to push her practice in a new direction. After some reflection, she knew what she had to do. "I'm going to blow up the border," she remembered thinking at the time, referring to the border between the United States and Mexico. "I'm going to say how it has just eaten up the whole world."

The US-Mexico border had been a focal point of Jimenez Underwood's weavings for several decades. Past works had referenced the border in oblique ways through the addition of barbed wire, the mashing together of the US and Mexican flags, and depictions of the colonization of the Americas. But for the "Xicana" exhibition, she took the US-Mexico border to a more visceral extreme, marking the line as a red gash in the wall. She surrounded it with large paper flowers, representing the state flowers of the four border states – California's golden poppy, Arizona's saguaro blossoms, New Mexico's yucca flower, and Texas's bluebonnet – all of which grow on both of the border's sides. About the work, titled *Undocumented Border Flowers* (2010), she said, as if to the US government, "What are you going to do: issue documents to flowers too?"

Jimenez Underwood has since made some 15 such "BORDERLINES" works across the country, often collaborating with schoolchildren or recently incarcerated women from local communities. The series provides "a way for a viewer who has no clue to get into the borderline and feel what happens in there – the energy," she said. "It's beautiful and positive, but there's this harshness over it. It's frightening to have your community affected by an arbitrary line. It damages a lot of people."

Jimenez Underwood, who was born in Sacramento in 1949, has an intimate relationship with the border, having crossed it numerous times during her youth. Her father was born in Mexico, of Huichol ancestry, and was undocumented in the US. She remembers watching him weave in their garage, on a loom he had created with nails, as he avoided immigration agents.

Jimenez Underwood made her first woven artwork while in her 20s. She was living in Los Angeles at the time and, on a trip to a grocery store, saw a United Farmer Workers (UFW) picket line, part of a nationwide boycott of grapes and lettuce. She was captivated by the UFW flag with a black eagle on a red background. "I saw the power of the eagle," she said, and went home to set up a loom to create *C.C. Huelga* (1974), the "C.C." referring to UFW leader César Chávez.

She felt connected to that struggle, not just as a Chicana but as a former *campesina* (farmworker). As the 11th of 12 children, Jimenez Underwood followed the harvest times of different crops with her family, trekking up and down Highway 99, from the border town of Calexico to the Oregon state line. She recalls a time as a child picking produce and feeling miserable under the beating sun. The young Consuelo stood up and yelled, "Is everybody happy?" Her fellow *campesinos* looked at her with bemusement and went back to work.

Seeing the toll such labor took on her family gave her a sense of urgency to get out of the fields, so as a child she formed a 10-year plan – by the end of which she would get her high school diploma and leave the croplands so she could tell the story of the people who remained. That

From left: *Dr. Martin L. King Jr., 1968*, 1990; *Emiliano Zapata, 1919*, 1990; *Woody Guthrie, 1967*, 1990; *John Chapman, 1845*, 1990; from the series "Heroes, Burial Shroud," 1989–94.

was no small task, as she attended school only outside the harvest season, taking classes from October to March. But she went on to be the first in her family to graduate from high school, and she has been thinking in terms of decades ever since.

"She never forgets her own experiences—about being a farm worker, about being viewed as less-than, about living with a father who was undocumented," said art historian Laura E. Pérez, who coedited a 2022 anthology about Jimenez Underwood and her work.

"She's independent and has her own way," said Beverly Adams, a MoMA curator of Latin American art, who recently curated Jimenez Underwood's Artpace residency in San Antonio. "She's not responding to anything other than her heart, her history, and her engagement and love of what she does and this place where she lives."

Jimenez Underwood has lived in California her entire life. Since 2020, she has been based at her property near Gualala, California, about three hours north of San Francisco. When looking to buy a *ranchito* (little ranch) in the late '90s, her husband peered at a map and the only town with an Indigenous name north of the city was Gualala, which means "where the water goes down" in Pomo. A quick turn off State Route 1, the plot of land sits above a hill, with a view of the Pacific Ocean. To the left is a small guest house and "the lodge," a one-room cabin with a ceiling made from a single redwood tree. To the right is her home and main studio. When I visited in April, just before her 76th birthday, a gentle sea breeze flowed through the grass, the flowers, and the redwoods that dotted the land.

The studio, in a former woodworking shop, contained two looms, two drafting tables, boxes of fabric, dozens of rulers, vases full of safety pins and buttons, and a mannequin with a denim jacket she embroidered in the '70s. Her studio and living quarters burst with countless spools of thread and wire in an endless array of colors. Some of her aluminum spools from the '90s cost $35; today, she said, they'd be closer to $350. Five years ago, she donated several to friends, schools, and thrift shops, realizing that she'd never be able to use them all.

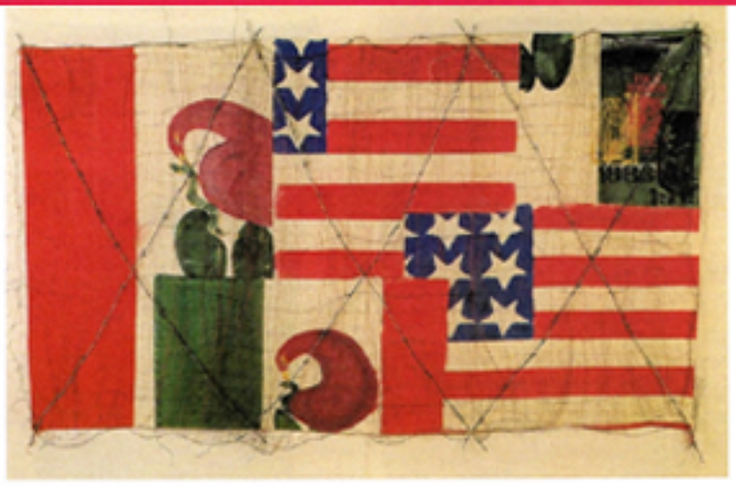
She maps out her designs in advance, creating rough sketches of the shapes that she then fills in with crayons. From there, she calculates the measurements—the number of wefts and warps—for each section. "I can't leave it up to whim," she said. "Everything has to be measured, because when you're here"—pointing to a particular part of a weaving in progress—"you don't see what's over there. I can't take it on faith. You can unroll it to see, but if I do that, I find I lose tension. I think it's cheating."

She showed me a new flag she was making, with the blue corner and red and white stripes of the US flag at the left, and the red and green of the Mexican flag at right. In the center was a fully white section. Across all three sections was a strand of barbed wire. After a trip to San Antonio for the opening of a show at her gallery, Ruiz-Healy Art, she would spend two to three weeks preparing her loom and then begin weaving her several-foot-wide flag. "In that process," she said, "your fingers, your energy, your sweat, your body oils, your thoughts, and your intentions are in the work."

Her working conditions weren't always so inspiring. Back in the '70s, when she was making her first weaving, Jimenez Underwood sought out a workshop where she could develop her skills, and found one in Torrance. She was one of only two women of color in the 15-person class, and the teacher, using a slur for Indigenous women, segregated the two of them from the rest of the group. Almost immediately, she remembered, "we looked at each other, and got out of there."

She had learned enough to turn to pattern books for further instruction and was fascinated by the seemingly endless approaches to weaving she found. "This would take me a lifetime to master," she recalls thinking at the time. "You could go on forever, for the rest of your life, and you will never do it all."

In 1976, after moving to San Diego with her husband and two young children at the age of 27, Jimenez Underwood forged another 10-year plan—this time to get her college degree and mount a solo exhibition like her idol, Chicano artist Rupert García, whom she had read about



Frontera Flag #1, Revolution, 1993.

in a magazine. After junior college, Jimenez Underwood transferred to San Diego State University, where she learned more about "how to read textiles" and the lineage she was working within. "I didn't want to be a jack of all trades," she said. "I had to be *puro hilo* [pure thread] to get the *viejitas* [the female elders] on my side. I could hear them asking, 'what's wrong with thread?'"

After completing her bachelor's degree in 1981, Jimenez Underwood decided to go for a master's at SDSU, and began working on 10 new weavings that would form the portfolio for her application. She had decided to create a series of landscapes that, to an uninformed eye, would pass as just that. To her eye, however, the scenes were encoded with borders. "My landscapes always had borders – that was my first code," she said.

After earning her master's degree in art from SDSU, she decided to go for another master's, enrolling in the MFA program at San Jose State University, where she began to focus on how she could add more than just abstract forms to her weavings. "At San Jose, I found my voice: context and content," she said. Upon completing her degree in 1987, Jimenez Underwood also took a tenure-track position to begin a teaching career that she continued at the university until she retired in 2009. Her decision to teach owed to something her mentor Joan Austin had told her years earlier: "If you get the degree, you have to give it back."

Juggling the demands of teaching and her art impacted Jimenez Underwood's studio practice, but her students kept her going. She remembers thinking years ago, when she had considered giving up her teaching job, "if I stay, I'll infect a whole generation of young women: Sí, *se puede*, with thread."

Gilda Posada, an art history PhD candidate who has written on Jimenez Underwood's work, said that Jimenez Underwood had indeed impacted generations of artists to take up weaving, through her pedagogy and by example, as one of the first Chicanas to earn an MFA and become a tenured professor. "She fought for her education," Posada said, "when society told her that she was nothing more than a farmworker."

Jimenez Underwood sees thread everywhere and in everything – including canvases for paintings, historically at the top of the art hierarchy. "So why is thread always disdained?" she asked. "Why is it always smeared up with oil and brushes?"

She decided she wanted to *weave* her canvas instead, and for more than 50 years, Jimenez Underwood has advocated for fiber art to be taken as seriously as other forms. "It seemed like a good fight to take up," she said. "The ranking of what art is is so arbitrary in many ways." But she has long felt that much of the fiber art she sees – from the past and the present – is just pure form. "That irritates me, because there is so much injustice. I think of art as a way to affect society, and I don't see form affecting society," she said. "I want to create statements, not just beautiful objects or beautiful cloth."

Carmen Febles, who is working on a monograph on Jimenez Underwood for the "A Ver: Revisioning Art History" series published by UCLA's Chicano Studies Research Center, said Jimenez Underwood "has worked to demonstrate that what can be done on the painted canvas can be done in fiber, and that fiber techniques have a lot to offer to the painterly world as well."

Jimenez Underwood's first mature body of work, her "Heroes, Burial Shroud" series (1989–94), is an early attempt to use form in the service of statements. During her graduate studies, Jimenez Underwood did research on the textile holdings at the San Diego Natural History Museum and became fascinated with Incan burial shrouds she found there. In 1984, preparing for her move to San Jose, she started her own burial shroud as a way to mourn the three acres of land in Escondido she had lived on for several years. "I'll contain my grief in that," she thought at the time. "It was an expression of who I was."

She returned to the shroud form a few years later, making six other shrouds in tribute to Joan of Arc, Johnny Appleseed, Woody Guthrie, Emiliano Zapata, César Chávez, and Martin Luther King Jr. Each "Burial Shroud" is measured to the height of the person to whom it is dedicated, and each varies to highlight individual personalities. The shroud for Guthrie is an almost monochromatic design made from natural linen: She wanted it to mimic dust, a nod to the musician's nickname as the Dust Bowl Troubadour. The Appleseed shroud borrows from the structure of an apple ladder with a colorful border, meant to suggest the landscape. The Zapata shroud is vibrant red, to evoke the revolutionary's bloody assassination.

After her "Burial Shrouds," Jimenez Underwood turned her attention to what would become another career-long interest: the weighted and at times fraught symbolism of flags. "You think threads are nothing?"

From left: *Land Grabs: Line of Demarcation, Land Grabs: UK/France Invasion, Land Grabs: Mexican Acquisition*; from the five-part work *Land Grabs: 500 Years*, 1996.

she asked. "Why is it so important in your flag then? You can't burn it. What makes it something you can't step on? That intrigued me more than what makes an object into art."

Among her early flag works is *Frontera Flag #1, Revolution* (1993), for which she cut up and sutured together simplified versions of the US and Mexico flags. The boundaries of the two meld into one another, suggesting the porosity of the US-Mexico border before walls were constructed to bisect it, and the composition is encased in barbed wire.

Jimenez Underwood incorporated barbed wire in other work around the same time, wanting to showcase a material meant to divide and cut as beautiful – and to free it from itself. "It doesn't like being barbed wire," she said, adding that she once taught her students how to use barbed wire and they took to it instantly. "The barbed wire brought us together, and yet it was something that was made to separate us."

She continued, "I'll stop using barbed wire and talking about the border when it comes down. Until then, I will always cry out: 'What are we doing to the Borderlands?'"

Laura E. Pérez, the art historian, described such work as "an invitation to think about where barbed wire is in our lives – it's not usually in a museum." Pérez continued, "What she's managed to do is broaden, deepen, and enrich our experience as witnesses of what it is to live with precarity, fear, danger, and violence that is both physical and psychological. Now, more than ever, what could be more profound?"

In the '90s, Jimenez Underwood made a five-part installation that looked at the roots of the borders in the Americas. She had seen how the US was celebrating the 500th anniversary of Christopher Columbus's voyage in 1492, which largely ignored that his arrival had brought about colonization and taken the land from the Indigenous people who were already here.

For a work titled *Land Grabs: 500 Years* (1996), she returned to the loom that she had seen her father make long ago to construct renderings of the Americas that showed how colonizers seized the land, from the arrival of European powers to the Louisiana Purchase and the acquisition of much of the Southwest following the Mexican-American War. Beneath each weaving is a candle honoring the people who died as a result of colonization. The tension in the strands of fiber that loop around each nail shows just how fragile the colonial project is. "It was 'in your face' as a weaving," she said. "I was so angry, and I have to put my anger into something beautiful."

Years later, in 2005, she confronted the border in an "in your face" manner once again in a performance titled *Tortilla Meets Tortilla Wall*. On a trip to the border at San Diego, she put a tortilla sculpture in the Pacific Ocean as an offering to a place that had been divided. At the time, she was working on a series of works for a 2006 exhibition titled "Tortillas, Chiles and Other Border Things" at Movimiento de Arte y Cultura Latino Americana (MACLA) in San Jose, and she had heard the US-Mexico border wall referred to as the "tortilla wall." "How dare they!" she remembers thinking, still exasperated decades later. Through her art, she decided to show the beauty in a food that was being denigrated. "Exaggerate the essential – that's what van Gogh said. What's essential to me? Chile, tortillas, my ancestors," she said.

Around the same time, she made one of her most iconic works to date, *Run, Jane, Run!* (2004), now in the collection of the Smithsonian American Art Museum. Measuring 10 feet tall, the work is vibrant yellow, like a road sign. Its scale and color stop you in your tracks. At its center is the word CAUTION, with an image of three figures (seemingly a father, mother, and their daughter) running. The imagery was drawn from a series of "immigrant crossing signs" that the California Department of Transportation erected along Interstate 5 near the US-Mexico border, and its resemblance to a deer-crossing warning was not lost on Jimenez Underwood. "I hated that whenever I saw it," she said of the signs. "What

Run, Jane, Run!, 2004.

bothered me the most is all the generations of young people who see that and are going to see us like animals." Also, about the child: "I realized I was that little girl – that was *me*," she said. "I wanted the viewer to get in there and feel that little girl run."

Mary Savig, a Smithsonian curator who helped acquire the work, said *Run, Jane, Run!* forces viewers to think about "what systems had failed people to put them in a situation where they're running across six lanes of a highway. It reminds us of everyone's humanity."

The shape of *Run, Jane, Run!* resembles a rebozo, a traditional Mexican shawl renowned for its delicate weaves and fringes. But in the context of the border, the rebozo also carried a potentially perilous reality: Women, primarily Indigenous ones, who wore them in border towns were often targeted and profiled by immigration authorities.

Jimenez Underwood had made her first rebozo weaving in 2001, the diptych *Rebozos de la Frontera: Dia/Noche*. The demands of her teaching didn't allow enough time for her to focus fully on the intricacies of the design required for such a textile. But when a hem on her skirt came

Photos of Jimenez Underwood's performance *Tortilla Meets Tortilla Wall*, 2005.

undone one day, a solution presented itself in the form of a safety pin – hundreds of which would go on to serve as the fringe. On the work, she had screen printed the "immigrant crossing signs," also held together by safety pins. One half of the diptych is dark blue, the other tannish pink. "I'll make them the color of the desert in the morning and in the afternoon, late dusk and early dawn, because that's when you cross," she recalls thinking at the time. "They'll blend into the desert landscape, and they'll always remember: *Cuidado, Cuidado, Cuidado*."

The past five years in Northern California – the first half of her most-recent 10-year plan – have been especially productive. "I probably will go to 90, but I'm going to leave it up to the 10-year god," she told me. "My dad and all the anonymous stitchers from around the world still want me to play – they get me up in the morning." Since her residency at Artpace in San Antonio, Jimenez Underwood has been on a bit of a science kick, plotting out weavings of the Cartwheel Galaxy and other constellations. The division between earth and space, she said, is just another border.

Throughout our time together, Jimenez Underwood reminded me in no uncertain terms that borders – whether real or imagined – have real-world implications. They affect not just people but the flora and fauna that live among us – as her powerful work *Broken: 13 Undocumented Birds* (2021) attests. The weaving, with squares of red evoking blood affixed to strips of black fabric, alludes to the birds who crash into the border wall from California to Texas. At this fraught moment in the US, with recent ICE raids having roiled and destabilized immigrant communities across the country, Jimenez Underwood's art takes on an even stronger poignancy. Her multivalent perspectives on the border are intended to make us rethink what arbitrary man-made lines actually mean – and to fight for better ways of living and working together. The center of that battle is California, where ICE has specifically targeted migrant farmworkers where Jimenez Underwood grew up and decided as a child to educate the world through the art she makes. And she is committed to protecting the land that she loves. "Ground Zero is California," she said. "I can't leave Ground Zero." ●