

ARTS & ENTERTAINMENT // ARTS & CULTURE

CAM Perennial at Artpace explores immigration and all sorts of borders

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Ethel Shipton sits by "Texas Swings/The Cross Roads," an installation that's part of the CAM Perennial exhibit at Artpace.

The idea behind the CAM Perennial, a regular part of the annual celebration of the city's contemporary art scene, is to bring in a guest curator from outside San Antonio to create an exhibit. CAMs past also have included artist exchanges between sister cities.

Those elements have been combined for this year's Perennial, which was pulled together by Canary Islands-based guest curator Adonay Bermudez. He chose three artists from the islands and three from San Antonio for the show. Plans are being made to exhibit the show in the Canary Islands some time in 2019, said CAM board member Orlando Graves Bolaños.

The show — titled “Beyond the wall. Border readings in a state of emergency” —deals with borders of all sorts and with immigration. And it includes a literal wall. One of the works created by the Canary Islands-based team known as PSJM is titled “Dos siglos de inmigración en Estados Unidos” (“Two Centuries of U.S. Immigration”). It places data showing the points of origin for immigrants to the United States in a colorful graphic on — to borrow a phrase — a big, beautiful wall.

Ethel Shipton's installation, "Texas Swing/The Cross Roads," directly references the border and the blending of languages. Two swings with words cut out of the seat — "united" and "best" — stand over a street map made of blue strips on the floor. When the swings are in motion, the words cast a shadow on the map below, where a handful of Spanish words have been written.

"The English words float above and they come in and out," said Shipton, who noted that her first language was Spanish. "Because that's the way the border works — it was all Mexico, right? And so, whatever the next imperialist group of people that come through, their words come and go, but they continue to lay on top of what's there.

"I try to use more positive words — like 'unite' and 'best' — and then you can make your own map, your own Google map (with the words on the floor): 'Aquí estamos juntos pasando — here we are together passing.' And we're best united. So that's my positive political message."

Sacks of corn were ready and waiting for artist Luna Bengoechea when she arrived at Artpace last Sunday.

Bengoechea, one of six artists who created installations for the Contemporary Art Month Perennial exhibition, was delighted that she could get right to work on her piece. She spent about three days using individual kernels of the yellow, white and blue corn to create an image of a Mexican coin with Cuauhtémoc, the last emperor of Mexico, in the center.

“For me, it was amazing (to be able to get right to work),” she said. “I was very happy, working with these colors.”

The piece — titled “Sin maíz no hay país” (“Without Corn, There is No Country”) — references the importance of corn to the Mexican economy, as well as the damage that has been caused by trade policies between Mexico and the U.S.

It is made entirely of corn — there’s no glue or other adhesive holding it together. When the exhibit closes, “Sin maíz” will be disassembled and taken to a farm, where the corn will be fed to the animals.

“That way, it has a second life and it’s not wasted,” Bengoechea said. “That’s the idea.”

Speaking in Spanish with Bolaños translating, Bermudez said part of the reason he agreed to curate the show was because it gave him a way to explore the connections and commonalities between the Canary Islands and San Antonio. That includes the history of immigration in both places, he said.

That is reflected in the artists he selected, he said, noting that they all have diverse backgrounds. Even the artists representing San Antonio, he said, “are from here, but they’re not from here.”

San Antonio-based artist Bárbara Miñarro’s piece illustrates that idea. “Tierra de Maíz, tierra hermana” (“Land of Corn, sister land”) is a large-scale installation that weaves and stitches together garments that she and other family members brought with them when they emigrated from Mexico, as well as some pieces they’ve acquired in their time in the U.S. The clothing is stuffed with newspapers as well as notes and journal entries that Miñarro has written over the years.

Her hope is that gallery visitors will get close to the piece, which includes large segments suspended from overhead.

“I intended for viewers to be able to walk around (it), but as you walk around, you kind of have to adjust to the piece — it’s dictating how you walk,” she said. “It’s not the piece adapting to you, but you adapting to the piece. So it’s like the immigrant experience.

Another piece, Hayfer Brea's "Una linea imaginaria" ("An Imaginary Line"), depicts the border as a point on the horizon, which Bermudez described as the most poetic piece in the show.

Text is part of most of the works in the show, Bermudez said, because language forges connections between people. It was important to him to put Spanish front and center as a reminder of its place in the city's culture.

The CAM Perennial is just one of the shows opening at Artpace this weekend. The bustling exhibition space also is opening "Sunset Belongs to Us," an installation by John Medina, and an exhibit of works by its latest class of international artists in residence: Paris-based Kapwani Kiwanga, Los Angeles-based Rafa Esparza and Austin-based Carlos Rosales-Silva.