



› [ART FOR EARTH'S SAKE](#)

# Weaving Beauty into the Borderlands

Through wall-size juxtapositions of bright, open flowers and jagged, disjointed lines, artist Consuelo Jimenez Underwood explores the fractured landscape along the U.S.–Mexico border.

September 16, 2019

[Courtney Lindwall](#)

---



*LA Borderline*, 2014, University Art Museum at California State University

Courtesy of the artist

Stretching more than a dozen feet up walls, all of [Consuelo Jimenez Underwood's](#) woven installations feature the same four state flowers: the poppy of California, the saguaro of Arizona, the yucca of New Mexico, and the bluebonnet of Texas. The plants are fixtures of the southwestern landscape, and they bloom on both sides of the U.S.–Mexico border.

In other words, the artist says, they are immigrants.

“My flowers are undocumented. How do you document a deer?” she asks. “Are my flowers going to get documented, too?”



Underwood in front of a 2010 installation, *Undocumented Border Flowers*, at the Triton Museum of Art in Santa Clara, California

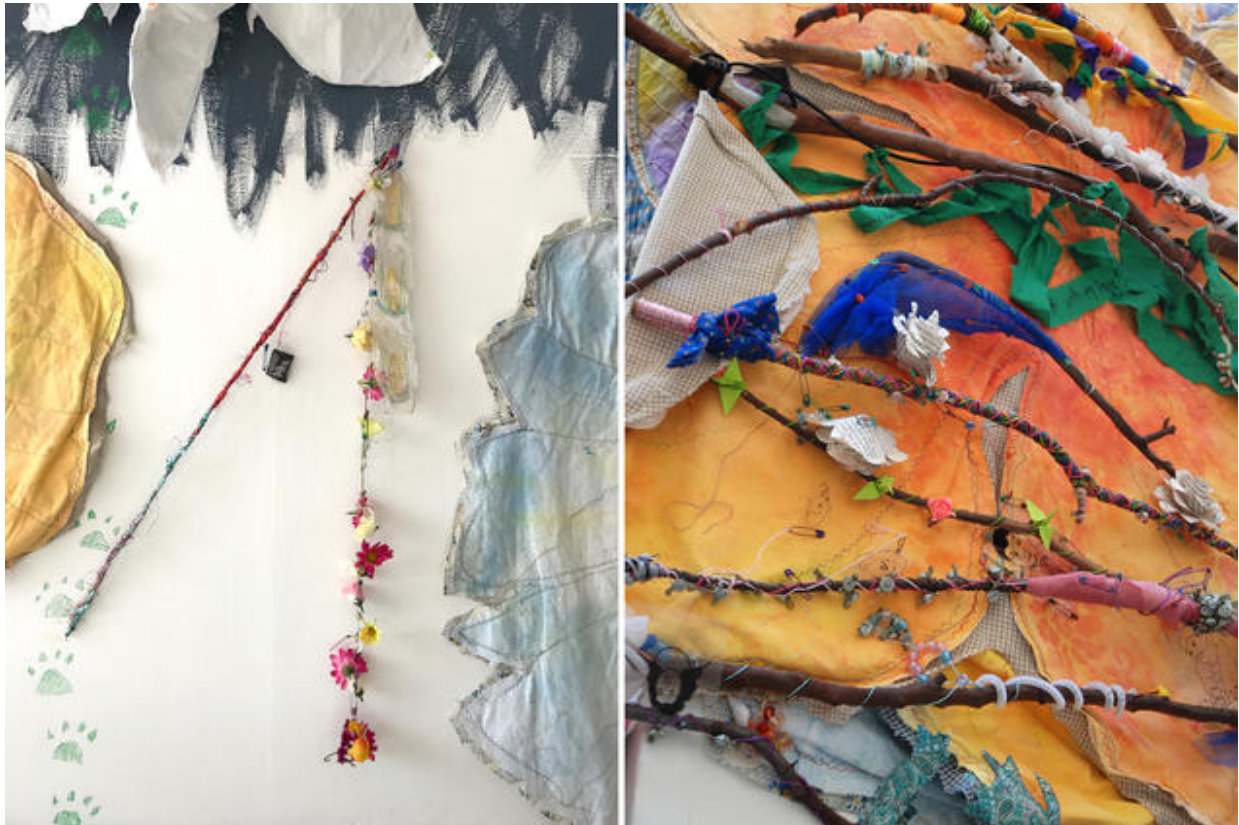
Courtesy of the artist

The dozen-plus weavings in Underwood's [ongoing \*Borderlines\* series](#) explore the relationship between human-made boundaries and the natural world, of which humans are (obviously) a part. Her latest in the collection is currently on display at the Fuller Craft Museum near Boston as part of the exhibit "[Mano-Made: New Expression in Craft by Latino Artists](#)."

The artworks, composed of fibers, paper, wire, paint, and beads, are bright and joyful even as they present the border itself, overlaid with the region's flora and fauna. "I really make it a beautiful landscape because the land is beautiful no matter where you are," says Underwood. "But it's not going to stay beautiful. So then I pierce it with these huge nails and put a borderline right through it."

The word *Caution* looms above some of works. In others, pawprints traipse over the dividing line, a nod to how borders, fences, and walls can [fracture wildlife habitats](#). In addition to the flowers of the four borderland states, each work features the official

flowers of the state hosting the installation—like the [American Beauty rose](#) of Washington, D.C., the [sagebrush](#) of Nevada, and, aptly, the Mayflower of Massachusetts.



Detail from *Undocumented Border Tracks*, 2017

#### Madison Metro

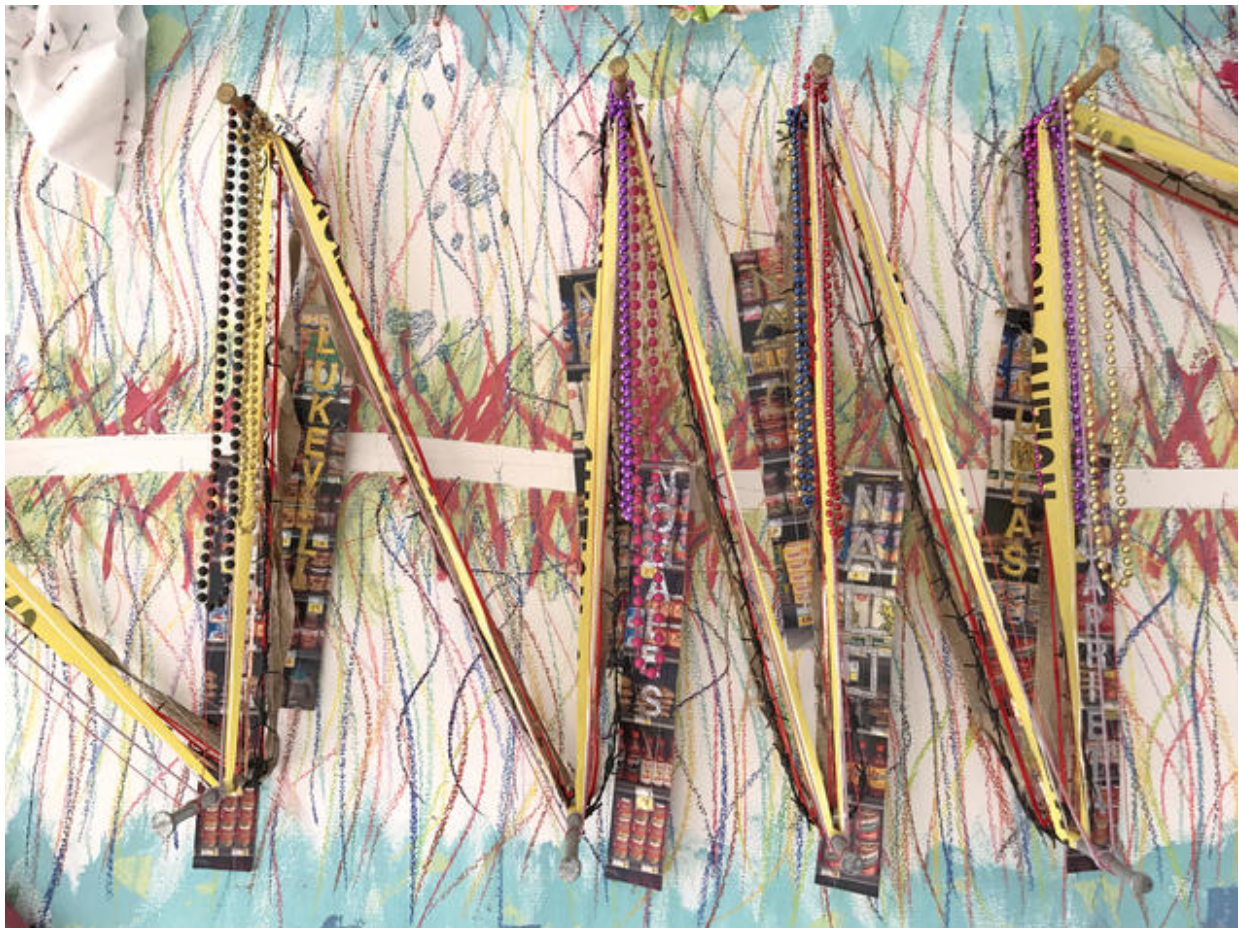
“People need to know there’s life and beauty and love and energy in the borderlands, even if it’s also horrific,” she says. Underwood knows some of that horror firsthand. Having grown up in a “family of pickers,” she recalls a childhood of working in the fields and traveling from farm to farm up and down California. While she, her mother, and 11 siblings were born in the States, her father was not; he was deported to Mexico multiple times before she turned 10, when he finally got his green card.

Each time her father was sent away, Underwood would help her family smuggle him back across the border. She remembers him lying down in a vehicle, hidden under a blanket in the footwell beneath her.

“From my dad, I learned how to love the plants and wind, how to talk to them, and how to ride this world. I made it beautiful in my head, but it was a harsh environment,” she says. “From my mom I learned the value of hard work, of *si se puede*, how there’s always a way out.”

Underwood says she knew she was smart early on, which helped her confront the world around her. And she was driven. She was the first in her family to graduate from college, then studied fine art as a graduate student at San Diego State University. Soon afterward, she became enthralled with textiles and weaving.

“I wanted to honor the ancient anonymous women who’ve created all the incredible textiles throughout the centuries, everywhere,” Underwood says.



Detail from *Undocumented Border Tracks*, 2017

Madison Metro

Underwood's professors warned her that she was becoming "a little too obsessed with weaving," she recalls, wondering when she would turn her attention to a fine art like painting, rather than something considered merely decorative. "Would you have told Van Gogh that he should weave instead of paint because he's getting a little too obsessive with his painting?" she would ask them. "His paintings changed painting. Well, I'm going to change weaving."

And she did. An anthology of writings by academics and critics discussing Underwood's art is in the works, likely to be published by the University of Pittsburgh Press next year. And she is currently working with the [Sarah Doyle Center for Women and Gender](#) at Brown University on an upcoming exhibit this October that will feature a *Borderlines* wall installation titled *Exposing Unseen Boundaries*. As part of the piece, visitors will be invited to record themselves singing their favorite song about the earth and then submit them on the center's website. (Underwood plans to sing "Morning Has Broken" by Cat Stevens and "Good Morning Starshine" from the musical *Hair*.) Curators will layer the songs over one another so that they mimic the sounds of rain, and the recording will be played alongside two of Underwood's *Borderlines* weavings.

Despite our country's current environmental and cultural strife, Underwood doesn't believe the apocalypse is quite here yet. "I love taking you to the edge where the void is about to begin, because that's where the power, magic, and spirit exist," she explains. "The piece says, 'It'll be okay here, on this side of the apocalypse.' But it also says, 'Hey, if we keep it up, it [the apocalypse] might come, so instead can we sing songs that are positive? That way, if the earth turns around, it'll be filled with beautiful noise.'"



Underwood mixing paint

Clayton Flores

From her homes in Cupertino and Mendocino, California, Underwood stays busy weaving and writing. She has plans for a book titled *Dao of Threads*, and then another after that. Underwood says she plans out her life by the decade. When she was a

child, she wanted to get out of the fields by 18. Now, the 70-year-old artist wants to finish her books by 80 and then transition from the weaving loom back to painting. Her professors will be happy.

“I can’t sleep for the next 10 years. I’ve got work to do,” she says, “but I think I’m just a conduit. All of us have this blessing . . . We all have our 80-year walk. All you can do is make it a little prettier, a little more powerful.”

*Consuelo Jimenez Underwood’s [Exposing Unseen Boundaries](#) will be on exhibit at the Sarah Doyle Center for Women and Gender at Brown University in Providence, Rhode Island, from October 7, 2019, until May 23, 2020.*