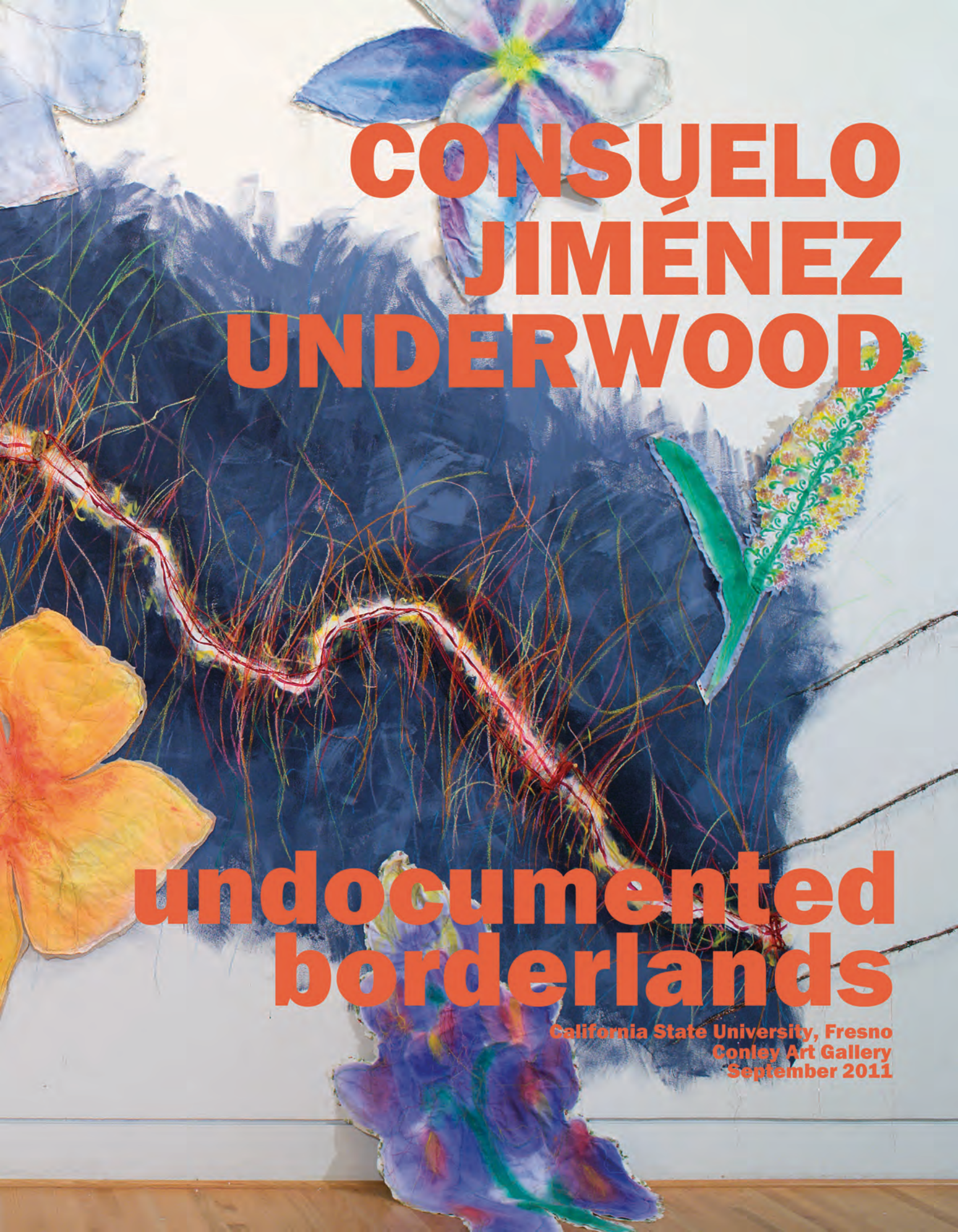


An abstract artwork featuring a dark, textured blue-grey background. A prominent, winding, root-like structure in red and white with fine, hair-like extensions in red, orange, and yellow threads traverses the center. Several stylized flowers are visible: a large blue and purple flower at the top, a large orange and yellow flower on the left, and a purple flower at the bottom. A green, leaf-like shape with a yellow and orange patterned border is on the right. The overall style is painterly and expressive.

CONSUELO JIMÉNEZ UNDERWOOD

undocumented borderlands

California State University, Fresno
Conley Art Gallery
September 2011



CONSUELO JIMÉNEZ UNDERWOOD

I come from the southwestern borderlands.

We live in a time of mythical greatness. Modernity is under construction. It is attempting to deal with apparent chaos and contradictions: the world is shifting; the world is teetering; the world is on the brink of disaster; but the world can spur us all onto greatness. The time of myth is now. Art can shower the nation with power and grace. Art can liberate society from old models of perception. The presented Artwork contributes to the vocabulary that is actively being restructured in order to understand, define, and change perceptions and thus prevent a major ecological disaster along our southern border.

My intent is to create powerful, culture-altering artistic statements that celebrate the survival and tenacity of the indigenous American spirit. The work contains historical references to land and politics that are re-interpreted with traditional fiber art methods.

It's a reflection of personal border experiences: the interconnectedness of societies; insisting on beauty in struggle; and celebrating the notion of seeing this world through my tri-cultural lens.

Engaging material that reflect the contemporary notion of hyper-modern sensitivity are interwoven to create large scale fiber art that is inspired in equal measures by land, politics and the spirit.

The artwork becomes an external validation of ancestral memory and personal quest. Beauty, grace, and flowers soothe the quiet rage that has permeated the Americas for more than five hundred years. Thus, when I weave, sew, or embellish, the old ones seem to express their encouragement and support of my creations.

The exhibition **undocumented borderlands** was made possible by a grant from the Associated Students, Inc. and support from the Center for Creativity and the Arts at California State University, Fresno (Director Associate Dean José Diaz), and the Department of Art and Design (Chair Martin Valencia).

Andrew and Dorothea Perenchio Museum Studies Interns Eliana Saucedo and Isabel Barraza assisted in the mural installation. The exhibition was further supported by: Gallery Technician, Edward Lund; Professor Nick Potter and members of the Gallery Committee; and faculty Dr. Laura Meyer and Nancy Youdelman.

Professor Julia Bradshaw organized the exhibition.



Cover Image and detail images this and next page "Undocumented Border Flowers" (2010)
Mural Installation, Triton Museum of Art

Undocumented Borderlands

Sites of Struggle and Spiritual Survival in
Consuelo Jiménez Underwood's Visual Art

by Clara Román-Odio

Undocumented Borderlands chronicles with piercing detail and hallucinatory imagery the painful yet hauntingly beautiful realities of life in the U.S.-Mexico border. Jiménez Underwood's exhibition confronts the viewer with a powerful reflection on the clash of colonization, national boundaries and indigenous cultures across the Americas. The mural format installation *Undocumented Border Flowers* (2010) presents the ten pairs of sister cities that lie next to each other on opposite sides of the border, using textiles, wires and nails to capture three-dimensionally the intricate, painful connections that tensely join their disparate realities. The dynamic interplay of this cross-border humanity is framed by an unpainted strip representing a "dead zone," the devastation of the environment.

As a contrast to this element of divisive human boundaries, the artist presents us with multiple iterations of the simple tortilla, as a symbol of the pervasiveness of indigenous cultures, and of the immemorial eating habits they shared. Masterfully, she also employs the tortilla as a platform to engage the viewer in political commentary about national territories, while addressing spirituality as a form of cultural resistance. Hence, Jiménez Underwood weaves a visual narrative that engages the viewer in a profound meditation about the cultural and political layers of the borderland; a territory plunged in pain and disavowal but evoked by the artist with a special beauty born of her indigenous heritage. Conceptually, Jiménez Underwood employs what Walter D. Mignolo calls "border thinking" (Mignolo 2000), "an intense cultural battlefield," which she uses to dismantle the colonial legacies of the Americas: brutal domination of the land and the indigenous cultures, marginalization of the vanquished, tarnished environment and poverty, cultural and spiritual *mestizaje*, and maximum exploitation of human capital and natural resources for gold, to benefit those in power. By acknowledging these cultural, economical, and environmental borders, Jiménez Underwood makes evident not only forced colonial expansion but also how First/Third World and North/South divides are the result of colonial legacies.

The daughter of migrant agricultural workers—a Chicana mother and a father of Huichol Indian descent – Jiménez Underwood's weavings and textile/fiber artworks unearth the indigenous in the Chicana/o. However, she does not create textiles in the traditional sense; she uses them to





express personal ideas the same way that a painter or sculptor might, by combining traditional textile materials with those not commonly used (barbed wire, plastic-coated wire, and safety pins). As Laura Pérez explains, her choice of materials and methods is not at all gratuitous, given that, “her multimedia, loom-based art work powerfully undermines contemporary gendered and racialized distinctions between art and craft that demote weaving to a ‘feminine’ or ‘third-world’ artistically undeveloped ‘craft’” (2007, 163). Art historian Ann Marie Leimer further shows that she shares the use of the so-called “needle arts” (weaving, embroidery, crochet, knitting, and quilting) with artists such as Faith Ringgold, Mónica Landeros, Orly Cogan, and Diane Gamboa “to question limiting gender roles, to produce new forms of knowledge, and to generate new sites of education, struggle and survival” (2011, 2).

Like many Chicana visual artists, Jiménez Underwood's aesthetics is informed by what Amalia Mesa-Bains named “Domesticana,” or the “Sensibility of the Chicana Rasquachismo” (1996, 156-63). Tomás Ybarra-Frausto had defined Rasquachismo as “a pervasive attitude or taste,” which originates in a particular social location, the viewpoint from *los de abajo* (those from below). This attitude, taste, and perspective arise from making due with what was at hand (1991, 133-34). Building on Ybarra-Frausto's theory of “Rasquache,” Mesa-Bains coins the notion of “Domesticana,” a Chicana feminist art theory that situates Chicana art production in the domestic sphere. Like Ybarra-Frausto, Mesa-Bains sees this artwork as “the product of resistance to the majority culture” (1991, 132) and as an “aesthetics of survival” (2003, 298). The use of the domestic—Mesa-Bains argues—serves paradoxically as its affirmation, as well as a powerful critique of this social sphere. By engaging with materials from the domestic, Jiménez Underwood not only legitimizes textile art as fine art, but also weaves visual narratives that speak for social justice.

As a child who crossed the border many times with her mother and undocumented father, Jiménez Underwood is deeply familiar with the dangers and political implications of the crossing. She expresses this experience forcefully by multiple iterations of the sign CAUTION, used along the border freeways, in the late 1980's, by the Department of Transportation of San Diego to warn drivers of the deadly risk posed by border crossers (Leimer 2011, 4). The original sign depicts a silhouette of a mother, father, and a little girl running across a stark yellow background. In **Undocumented Borderlands** the artist relentlessly recasts this image, as if compelling the viewer to reflect about his/her participation in the human and natural exploitation of the borderlands.

Jiménez Underwood's South-North cartography destabilizes both the idea of culture as monolithic and static and the margin-periphery model of analysis. She resists stasis and the North-South,





Western-Eastern perspective by using spirituality as a form of cultural resistance. Hence, the artist crosses the Virgin of Guadalupe with *Coatlicue* (the Aztec mother of all, gods and humans) in both Americas, staging her artwork within the larger context of the continent and its layered histories (Román-Odio, 2011). She also deploys tactics that resist conflating the local and the national. By embracing the spiritual and material elements that have dignified and nurtured Indo-Hispanic cultures for over five hundred years, Jiménez Underwood celebrates the local (the chili of Tepin, *Coatlicue* and the *Virgen*). Yet, she does it with a clear awareness of the global present that fantasizes with a homogenous mass of Western, white, First-World citizens. Thus, the artist's affirmation of the local becomes a strategy to dismantle the narrative of the global, which tends to render invisible the borderland peoples and their legacies of colonialism.

Undocumented Borderlands engages the viewer in a critical reflection about subaltern knowledge production and the possibilities of disrupting what Mignolo calls the global designs of coloniality. Hence, in response to Gayatri Spivak's question "Can the Subaltern Speak?" (1988) Jiménez Underwood offers a visual representation that undeniably puts "the cultural battlefield" of the Americas back on the political agenda; and in doing so, it forcefully answers that the Subaltern not only can but, even more, should and will speak.

Dr. Clara Román-Odio

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"Tortilla Meets Tortilla Wall," *Tortilla: Dyed and stitched corn leaves Performance 2006 US/Mexico Border At Imperial Beach, Alta California and Tijuana, Baja California, América*
Photograph courtesy Valerie Mendoza



