

Expression Beyond Language: Immigrant Art in a Global Pandemic & U.S. Political Turmoil

By Immigration Prof

Guest blogger: Allegra Upton, law student, University of San Francisco:

When words fail, art speaks. As *Myanmar Times* writer Wade Guyitt aptly noted, “Art is the original common tongue – it allows meaning to be transmitted between cultures which lack a shared language. But it also crosses the gulf between another two islands: the sayable and the unsayable.”[1] In recent years, cultural artistic expressions borne of migration and the immigrant experience in the United States serve as a crucial bridge between the immigration and social justice advocacy movements.

As the Trump Administration enacts policies that separate children from their families, stymie asylum applicants at the U.S.-Mexico border, and foster xenophobic laws within the United States, artists of all walks of life counter such painful realities with artistic mediums that give voice to their frustrations, fears, hopes, dreams, and lived experiences. Although art alone cannot staunch the flow of life-threatening legal changes at play in the U.S. today, such reflections on the immigrant plight can help create day-to-day spaces of hope, beauty, and perspective amidst what many creators see as a very dark and momentous presidential term.

Indeed, entire exhibits and collections have been dedicated to the immigrant experience during the last four years. Currently, from September 9th to October 24th 2020, the Elizabeth Foundation for the Arts (EFA)’s *Project Space Program* is currently presenting “The Immigrant Artist Biennial 2020: Here, Together!”[2] This event is an inaugural multi-site project presenting works by 60+ U.S.-based immigrant artists that strive to “confront a national rhetoric of exclusion, nationalism, and discrimination.” The exhibit is volunteer-based, female-led, and an artist-run project.[3] While initially delayed due to COVID-19, these artists’ works prove themselves timelessly poignant in 2020 – they call for urgent unity and visibility as their pieces explore displacement, alienation, and the “steady erosion of American Empire.” On the virtual exhibit whose release straddles both the global pandemic and the upcoming U.S. presidential election, curator Katya Grokhovsky stated:

“These artists call forth the power dynamics and hierarchies of a late-stage struggling capitalist society in dire need of compassion and humanity. Their work grapples with issues of identity, the meaning of home and place, and the consistent, looming threats of erasure, removal, and cultural whitewashing.”

From 2017 to 2020, the world-famous Museum of Modern Art (MoMA) in New York ran a two-year online exhibit entitled, “Crossing Borders, Immigration and American Culture.”[4] This digital exhibition highlighted artists who immigrated to the U.S. (often as refugees) and includes works from a range of mediums – painting, sculpture, drawing, photography, performance, film, design, and architecture – spanning nearly a century. The artists hail from Lebanon, Iran, Germany, the Netherlands, France, Pakistan, Cuba, Latvia, Hong Kong, Nigeria, Bulgaria, Chile, Armenia, amongst others. Besides showcasing beautiful immigrant creations, the exhibit’s purpose is to draw attention to what society oftentimes overlooks in discussions on immigrant issues – the “flow of ideas and people with varied backgrounds and experiences [that] has been a consistent driver of innovation and creativity” within America’s borders. While pundits on news channels correlate immigrants with a “taking away of American jobs,” MoMA subtly yet powerfully suggests an opposite interpretation; namely, that American culture “has flourished through the contributions of artists from around the world... this [is a] fact.”

In addition to collections, individual artists and advocates also raise their expressive voices to add to the ever-growing call for unity and acceptance for immigrants. Favianna Rodriguez is one such individual.[5] A self-proclaimed interdisciplinary artist, cultural strategist, and social justice activist based in Oakland, California, Rodriguez and her art

works to address migration, gender justice, climate change, racial equality, and sexual freedom. Rodriguez's work speaks to both her personal experiences as a woman of color, as well as larger socio-economic and cultural trends. Her practice "boldly reshapes the myths, stories, and cultural practices of the present, while healing from the wounds of the past," and her projects include package design for Ben & Jerry's "Pecan Resist" ice cream, two large scale public art commissions with the City of San Francisco, a partnership with Jill Solloway to create 5050by2020.com, and an upcoming storytelling initiative at the U.S.-Mexico border.[6]

Rodriguez's work (as seen below) incorporates vibrant colors, striking lines, and powerful messages that inspire as well as call folks to action. Her "Migration is beautiful" butterfly design celebrates the resiliency, courage, and determination of migrants who come in search of their dreams.[7] It started as being a key image at the 2012 Democratic National Convention in collaboration with DocuBus, and now merits recognition as a popular symbol of the immigrant rights movement.

Rodriguez and the exhibits at MoMA and the EFA produce work that embody and give voice to the lived immigrant experience. Such artistic expressions fuel the social justice movement and act as real-world testimonies to the immigration narratives that should drive policymakers' and advocates' platforms. When immigrant arts' voices are heard in the world of law and policy, a powerful call for change, acceptance, and inclusion can reverberate across all walks of life in the United States.

[1] Wade Guyitt, *When words fail, art speaks*, MYANMAR TIMES (Aug. 21 2015), <https://www.mmtimes.com/lifestyle/16090-when-words-fail-art-speaks.html>

[2] EFA Project Space Program, *The Immigrant Artist Biennial 2020: Here, Together!*, THE ELIZABETH FOUNDATION FOR THE ARTS, <https://www.projectspace-efanyc.org/tiab>

[3] The Immigrant Artist Biennial [TIAB], *About*, <https://www.theimmigrantartistbiennial.com/about>

[4] Museum of Modern Art, *Crossing Borders, Immigration and American Culture*, <https://www.moma.org/calendar/exhibitions/3813>

[5] Favianna Rodriguez, <https://favianna.com>

[6] Favianna Rodriguez, *About: Biography*, <https://favianna.com/about/biography>

[7] Favianna Rodriguez, *Artworks: Migration is beautiful*, <https://favianna.com/artworks/migration-is-beautiful-2018>

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<https://lawprofessors.typepad.com/immigration/2020/10/expression-beyond-language-immigrant-art-in-a-global-pandemic-us-political-turmoil.html>

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