

Consuelo Jiménez Underwood

American Fiber Artist



If you asked acclaimed fiber artist Consuelo Jiménez Underwood about the meaning of life, love, and the universe, she would probably give you one word: thread. Best known for her mixed-media textiles and art installations, Underwood has spent over 30 years mastering an art form as old as mankind. “It’s so metaphoric, that’s why I love that word,” she says. “It’s a powerful idea, that one line can create an object...One thread, one cone, I can weave a beautiful weaving. And if I just placed the threads vertically, horizontally, and in a certain pattern, weaved stuff inside of them, I can make important statements that people will look at.”

From safety pins, barbed wire, silks, or caution tape, Underwood’s creations are not what you might think of as typical textiles. Instead, they’re bold tapestries and delicate shrouds, interwoven with commentary on immigration politics, spirituality, feminism, decolonization, and more. Mixing eclectic materials with traditional tools, Underwood loves to push the boundaries of expectation and meaning in her craft. Often drawing inspiration from her Chicana-Huichol heritage and her technical background in loom-based weaving, sewing, and embroidery, the end product is an object that is both nostalgic and familiar, with undertones of the artist’s personal narrative.

Threads have been part of Underwood’s identity for as long as she can remember. Originally born in Sacramento, Underwood grew up on the road, shuttling back and forth between the towns of Calexico, California, and Mexicali, Mexico. From a young age she worked in agriculture, picking prunes and tomatoes in the fields with her family; she struggled with school, with Christianity, and the overarching fear of her father being deported (as he sometimes was).

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Thinking back, Underwood recalls her father being her earliest mentor in weaving, when he used his loom in the garage during the winter off-season. “That’s when I saw the thread in action,” she shares. “He would weave those paper doll dresses, and just connect them on the top and the side, and I’d wear them. And that stopped by the time I was six because my elder brothers and my uncles would laugh at him. And so, he didn’t do it anymore.” That memory stayed with her, however, rooted in Underwood’s creative psyche as a dissonant reminder of both her father’s tenderness and the toxic social constructs surrounding the craft.

When Underwood started college at San Diego State in the early ’80s, she saw projections of beautiful textiles in her course “Folk Arts of Mexico” and was mesmerized. “I knew I wanted to learn how to weave a rebozo,” she explains. “Because I saw the old Indian ladies that were beggars on the sidewalk...And their shawls had holes; they were so faded in color. And I knew that lady who was asking for money with her two kids there on the sidewalk, being spat on and kicked by the people walking by; I knew she knew more than I did, because she knew how to make a rebozo...That struck me. I just realized, what a loss, what a cultural loss.” Thread was Underwood’s calling, but she wasn’t sure what she would do with her degree. Maybe she would work at a senior center or out of her garage or start a taquería just so she could weave on the side for herself. Either way, she was determined to be put into history.

After earning her BA and MA degrees from SDSU, Underwood entered the MFA program at San Jose State University as one of the few textile students among installation, mixed media, and performance majors. It was a culture shock: whereas San Diego





American Foods: Corn, Bean, Squash



Work in progress

State taught her how to refine form, San Jose wanted content and context. “That’s when I started using barbed wire,” she says, referring to one of her favorite elements. “Well, you know my context? It’s that [border] fence; that’s the barbed wire.”

One of the most challenging aspects, Underwood reflects, was being ostracized in an arena dominated by the conventions of traditional fine art. “I knew what went down all over the world with fine work, anonymous [stitchers], and to be claimed decorative and made fun of as underwater basketry.” So, she became outspoken and confident, recognizing she had something authentic, powerful, and timeless.

“I was fearless. Fearless because I was in the unknown, where nobody was doing what I was doing.”

Following her MFA, Underwood took on a tenured teaching position as head of fiber and textiles at SJSU. She spent the next 20 years instructing students in technique while sharing philosophy on threads and self-expression. “I would tell them clearly and directly all my thoughts, and that’s why I think they loved me,” she adds, with an edge of humor. When her students got upset over mistakes, she wouldn’t hesitate to remind them of the big picture.

“If you want to be an artist, figure out who you are. Because that’s the most important strength and power an artist has...If you don’t do art for who you are, you’re doing it for your teacher, for your mom, for the color that you like so much. That’s fine when you’re starting, but if you’re a professional, serious, and you’re going to make this a life walk, then focus. Who are you, what do you need to talk about?”

Underwood equipped her pupils to not just be weavers of textiles, but contemporary artists ready to challenge and engage



Soaring American Landscape (Partial section)



Work in progress

with the world. Much like her father and those anonymous stitchers lost to history, she was passing the torch to younger generations for them to empower and preserve the legacy of threads. When she reached 60, Underwood finally decided to retire from academia to pursue her art full-time. In her absence, the textiles concentration was stripped down and converted into the Department of Design. While this came as a loss, it was also a moment of long-overdue liberation; after spending decades transforming within the roles of student and mentor (and discovering her artistic drive while doing so), Underwood was ready to go all in.

Since then, her pace has hardly slowed, even amidst a global pandemic. Nowadays she works from her home in Gualala, California, complete with a bunker of yarn, several large looms on site, and her father's small weaving frame—a keepsake reserved for making miniature tapestries in between projects. Over the years her work has been exhibited nationally and internationally, with artwork in permanent collections at the Smithsonian, Oakland Museum of Art, and MoMA. She's been featured in countless specials like KQED's *Spark* program or *Craft in America* by PBS; and this year, Underwood celebrates the award of a 2022 Latinx Artist Fellowship, along with the release of her publication *Consuelo Jiménez Underwood: Art, Weaving, Vision*.

As tedious and time-consuming as weaving may be, Underwood loves the craft more than any other medium. It is the nexus for her Chicana-Indigenous ancestry, her activism, and her natural inclination as a storyteller, an undeniable symbol of versatility and human connection extending through past, present, and future. "Now I'm at the age where I just want to enjoy it," she muses, contemplating the endless possibilities. It's a powerful idea, after all, that one person, one thread can be capable of so much. **Q**