

WARP AND WEFT: BORDER CROSSING AS A CREATIVE FORCE

IN THE ART OF CONSUELO JIMENEZ UNDERWOOD

By Carmen Febles, Associate Professor of Latinx culture and literature and Velina C. Underwood, manager and daughter of the artist

Consuelo Jimenez Underwood has been crossing borders her entire life. Her artistic viewpoint is a result of her lifetime engagement with the United States/Mexico Border. As the daughter of a Chicana mother and a Huichol Indian father from Mexico she grew up on both sides of the border with an understanding that her heritage encompasses and spans territorial designations. Her belonging to and relationship with the bifurcated borderlands is implicit in her tricultural heritage that predates the arrival of European settler colonists. Jimenez Underwood imbues her work with an ethos, drawn from her Indigenous heritage, that centers the interconnectivity of all living beings with each other and their natural environment.



Consuelo Jimenez Underwood, "Run, Jane Run!," 2004. Woven cotton, linen, fabric, barbed wire, and CAUTION tape, 120 x 72 inches. Collection of the Smithsonian American Art Museum, Museum purchase made possible by the Alturas Foundation. Image by Ruben Diaz.

The iconic “CAUTION” sign is a recurrent symbol in Jimenez Underwood’s work. The sign itself is the central focus of “Run Jane, Run!.” Although the piece was woven on a large floor loom, the completed work is framed by two wooden sticks, evoking a backstrap loom, a tool emblematic of Indigenous art practice in Mexico. The alternating black and yellow chevrons, above and below the sign, reference Indigenous woven designs. Jimenez Underwood’s father migrated to the U.S.



Portrait of Consuelo Underwood with “Undocumented Border Flowers,” Triton Museum of Art, 2010.

as a bracero, or temporary worker, during World War II. Once the war was over, he was repatriated to Mexico and forced to leave his family behind. The memories of her father being systematically deported across the border were seared into her psyche as a young child. In “Run Jane, Run!,” the depiction of the “CAUTION” sign with a human family running registers as a critique of the crass characterization of migrants, who are making a perilous journey across the border, as simply one more traffic hazard. As Jimenez Underwood recounts, “When I first zipped past the “CAUTION” sign at 75 mph, on my way from San Diego to Los Angeles, way back in the early 1980s, I almost braked. I was appalled, angry, and shocked that the citizens of our nation were asked to accept this image of a running family crossing the Interstate 5 Freeway. Plus, I totally identified with the little girl.” Ostensibly, the road sign, ominously reminiscent of “Deer Crossing” signs, is a warning to motorists to be alert for migrants darting over freeways. “Run Jane, Run!” confronts the spectator with the dehumanizing rhetoric implicit within the “CAUTION” sign and poses the ethical questions of who needs protection in this border crossing scenario, and from what.





Jimenez Underwood's "Borderlines" installations, such as "Undocumented Border Flowers," bring to the forefront the ecological and environmental impacts of the U.S./Mexico border. These large-scale works have as a backdrop a wall mural of the U.S./Mexico borderland painted in situ onto the local geography or extant architecture, over which the artist adds various mixed-media elements. The border is represented as a jagged incision that traverses the landscape, but the flora and fauna depicted in these pieces thrive around, through and in spite of the dividing line. The "Borderlines" series dramatically represents the regenerative power of the natural world and serves as a reminder that humans are merely one life-force that acts upon and matters in the world. Eschewing the notion of powerlessness or passivity in the face of the ever-increasing invasiveness of artificial border structures, Jimenez Underwood's work often evokes the agency of the natural world in resisting, subverting or simply outlasting human-erected barriers. Her 2021 work, "Broken: 13 Undocumented Birds," brings into stark relief the environmental and economic destruction wreaked by the U.S./Mexico Border Wall, highlighting the agency of the Red-Tailed Texas Blackbirds that deploy a small contingent of their flock into, instead of over, the wall. Jimenez Underwood wove six border wall slats and 26 pairs of red and black shapes -- rendering bodies, wings, and tails -- to document the moment of impact. In her words, "Isn't that wild? How they just separate from the group? And then they smash into the wall, and apparently their broken bodies disappear overnight, everything's gone because of insects and other border critters."

In her work, we observe a consistent but evolving message that the policies and structures of border enforcement are antithetical to the natural and essential movement of living beings in our world. Jimenez Underwood posits that the birds' flight pattern is a self-sacrifice -- a form of protest, akin to the self-immolation of Buddhist monks protesting the Vietnam War. Bringing her critique full circle from the "CAUTION" sign, the artist poses the question, "If we don't care about the tragedy of humans who die crossing the border, perhaps we care about the tragedy of animals' migratory patterns being impeded, resulting in their loss of life?"

Consuelo Jimenez Underwood, "Broken: 13 Undocumented Birds," 2021. Woven and stitched wire, fabric, threads, 72 inches x 47 inches. Collection of the artist. Image by Finger Photography.