

# Senior Living



## Fiber artist breaks through boundaries

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PHOTOS BY LAURA MORTON

Fiber artist and weaver Consuelo Jimenez Underwood works on her loom at her home studio in Gualala. Her work often depicts her personal border experiences.

## Renowned artist channels ancestors, memories to explore crossing borders

By Carey Sweet

Consuelo Jimenez Underwood may be 72 years old in this mortal world, but the internationally renowned weaver and fiber artist draws on a more ancient realm for her craft. Even before receiving her very first award, an Honorable Mention for a painting at the California State Fair in 1981, she felt her creative process

guided by ghosts.

"Over thirty years ago, when 'craft versus art' was the most divisive issue in the arts, I discovered and established my authentic artistic voice, and refocused my artistic studies from the paintbrush and pigments to needle and thread," she writes in her published mission statement. "Empowered by the voices of my indigenous maternal ancestors, I

began to cross the intellectual borders that separated the hand and the mind (craft), from the spirit (fine art)."

Other visions came to her: she was born in Sacramento on April 29, 1949, during what she calls "the Taurus, the Euro system of metaphysical calendar," and "in the year of the Asian calendar, the year of the bull." That led to "double power," she said. "In

both systems, the Earth, and my strength from the Earth is prominent."

But lest you think this artist is entirely mystical, it's important to understand the reality of her upbringing and how it influences her work. The 11th child of 12 to migrant farm laborers Ismael Jimenez Aguirre and Francisca Cruz Jimenez, her heritage is Huichol Indian on her father's

side, and Chicana on her mother's side.

She draws on both cultures for her brightly colored murals, tapestries, quilts and woven rebozo shawls that speak of landscapes, historically fractured civilizations and self-strength.

Jimenez Underwood spent her childhood on both sides of the California-Mexican border, crossing between Calexico and Mexicali to attend school in the states, where she became keenly aware of America's imposed boundaries.

Her family moved often, chasing seasonal harvests, and her earliest memories are of working in the fields and orchards around



Above: Fiber artist Consuelo Jimenez Underwood demonstrates her work process at her loom in Gualala. Far right: Jimenez Underwood creates brightly colored murals, tapestries, quilts and woven rebozo shawls out of her home studios in Gualala and Cupertino. Right: An in-progress piece of art depicts undocumented border flowers. The 72-year-old artist's works have been exhibited at galleries and museums across America and Mexico as well as in Israel and Korea.



Vacaville, Suisun and Fairfield. To protect herself, she turned to dreams, and searched for beauty.

"I remember seeing photos of me as an infant, tucked in a wooden prune box watching my sisters and brothers picking," she said. "By the time I was a toddler, my younger sister and I were in charge of picking the scattered prunes that my dad shook down from the trees. We were smaller and more lithe, so it made sense, no?"

Those experiences summoned one of her first statement pieces, an early 1980's collage experimenting with photo transfers and

screen printing. In one panel, a black-and-white photo captures Jimenez Underwood, her mother and the family dog in 1963, sitting next to a stack of prune boxes (priced 35 cents a box, it reads). A large, superimposed blue-green-gold stamp of Our Lady of Guadalupe hovers above, protecting the family.

"The orchards of peaches, apricots, pears and plums abounded," Jimenez Underwood recalled. "There were so many fields of multicolored wildflowers, incredible insects and many different colored robins and blue jays."

She remembers it as a good

### Details

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time.

"The Beatles and the Rolling Stones had just busted through the air waves. I was happy. The best part was I belonged to a generation of peace, love and flowers."

Yet, as with much of her art, life rippled with traumatic undercurrents. Jimenez Underwood's father was undocumented, and she still relives the horror of the many times he was picked up by border control agents then

the border drama."

And so in the plum box collage, the Lady of Guadalupe is flanked by darker colored stamps of gun-toting Mexican banditos, and blood red silhouettes of a father and mother fleeing with a child under the bold print word, "caution."

dumped in random spots of Mexico. The family would have to somehow find him and smuggle him back home hidden under a blanket in the footwell of their car.

"To have my dad whisked away at night or in the daylight of the fields, being chased ... the worst," she said. "It was very dysfunctional and dramatic, but I knew there was a bigger purpose to my personal experience. I would learn, and then implement change or at least bring light to

The image, Jimenez Underwood explained, represents immigrant crossing signs she saw on the Interstate 405 San Diego highway in the early '80s, designed to resemble an animal-crossing marker. And that image would continue to be an anchor

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# Fiber artist highlights struggles at border

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of many of her future pieces. In her 2005 piece "C. Jane Run," for example, she screen printed the sign onto 120 pieces of clothing patches made into a 10-by-17-foot quilt, in tribute to the many unidentified immigrants who were killed while crossing that highway in search of a better life.

"I found out that when a person is hit by a car at full speed, nothing recognizable is left, except small fragments of clothing," she said. "I felt the need to construct a memorial quilt of sorts, a large-scale textile created to honor the anonymous dead who died when crossing the freeway."

These days, Jimenez Underwood lives a life very far removed from her time living in tents, abandoned garages or dirt floor sheds on the farms she and her family worked. She has comfortable homes in Cupertino and Gualala in Mendocino County.

She was the first in her family to graduate from high school, went on to college, then got a Master of Arts degree from San Diego State University, and a Master of Fine Arts degree from San Jose State University. She was a professor and Head of Fiber/Textile Area for eight years at the School of Art and Design at San Jose State University.

Her works have been exhibited at galleries and museums across America and Mexico, in Israel and Korea. An academic anthology of essays and 80-plus color reproductions about her work is currently in production with Duke University Press, titled "Consuelo Jimenez Underwood: Art, Weaving, Vision," and due out June 2022.

Also in July, the San Jose Museum of Quilts & Textiles will host a retrospective exhibit called



PHOTOS BY LAURA MORTON

**Above:** Fiber artist Consuelo Jimenez Underwood demonstrates her work process on an in-progress piece of art depicting undocumented border flowers. **Below left:** Jimenez Underwood works with a variety of tools to create her pieces. **Below right:** The 72-year-old artist will have a retrospective exhibit in 2022 at the San Jose Museum of Quilts & Textiles as well as a book coming out.



"Consuelo Jimenez Underwood: Thread, Spirit, Resistance," and covering works from 1974 to 2020.

Next November, meanwhile, Jimenez Underwood's piece

"Virgen de los Caminos" will be featured in a "Subversive, Skilled, Sublime: Fiber Art by Women" exhibition at the Smithsonian American Art Museum.

Reflecting now on all her hard



times, Jimenez Underwood feels like the struggle might actually have been a spiritual gift, as it informed her art and pushed her to build a life she is proud of.

"I saw everything I did not

want to do when I grew up," she said. "I realized early that if I played the cards right, I would have an incredible adult life. And I absolutely have that. I guess, in a perverse way, I was blessed."