

Journey to the Land of the Dead:

A Conversation with the Curators of the *Hijas de Juárez* Exhibition

Victoria Delgadillo and Rigo Maldonado

To pay homage to the more than 320 women of Juárez, Mexico who have been abducted, raped, and murdered over the last ten years, the Social and Public Art Resource Center (SPARC) in Venice, California hosted the *Hijas de Juárez* exhibition.¹ Running from 3 November 2002 through 21 February 2003, the exhibit presented installations, altars, works on papers, digital art, and sculpture. Artists in the show included Rigo Maldonado and Victoria Delgadillo among many others.² Outreach programming sought to raise awareness of the crimes in Juárez: it included a community discussion with artists and activists, a candlelight vigil and protest on el Día de la Virgen de Guadalupe, and a “call to action,” featuring readings and performances by writers such as Alicia Gaspar de Alba and Claudia Rodríguez and performance artists such as Raquel Salinas.

In the following essays and an interview with UCLA Women’s Studies and Chicana/o Studies major Carolina Chávez, we trace our deepening involvement in activism around the Juárez murders, including two trips we made to Ciudad Juárez in February and October 2002, and the process of curating the *Hijas de Juárez* exhibition in November of that year.

Victoria Delgadillo

Survival, for me, has always been the constant weighing of data, followed by the actions necessary for making what I believe to be righteous decisions. My participation in the civil rights movements of the 1960s and 1970s as well as my nontraditional spiritual exploration have instilled in



Fig. 1. Rigo Maldonado and Victoria Delgadillo starting from scratch (2002). Snapshot by Jennifer Araujo.

me the belief that anything is possible, no matter how great an obstacle or how seemingly impossible a venture. In my lifetime, I have witnessed many miracles.

Collaboration with anyone for any purpose is a marriage of ideas and beliefs. In my experience, choosing the appropriate collaborator for an exhibition makes the difference between a successful endeavor and one that is doomed to fail. The stress involved in producing the simplest event can easily ruin partnerships, especially if there is no true merging of visions and beliefs.

I met Rigo Maldonado in the fall of 1999 when we traveled to China on a Chicana/o artist exchange. There was that instant spark in his eye that signaled to me his lighthearted playfulness, yet he spoke intelligently. This is important to me with friends and co-creators, because I feel that most times one has to give in to whatever a situation requires; you allow the situation to take you on a journey. I (and Rigo, too) went blindly to China, not knowing anyone, or what to expect—not even knowing if we would really be going, since the arrangements were made over the telephone by a mysterious voice with no face. Yet, there was a feeling at my core that I needed to go for ... well, I didn't know at the time why, but I went anyway. As soon as the seat belt light went off, Rigo found me on the airplane and sat next to me. For fourteen hours we talked and laughed and found that our initial assumptions were true: we were very much alike. By the time we landed, I felt that he was someone I felt safe enough to share my thoughts with, that he possessed a grand energy and a generous spirit, and that we would become great friends.

We became the group's rebels, making excuses to skip the approved itinerary in order to find a solid black disco club lit only by red lanterns, to

enjoy a tea ceremony while we watched the Peking Opera, and—a must for Rigo—to go to the biggest and oldest cemetery in Beijing. “To see how they honor their dead,” he said.

Through Rigo, I began to learn more about our Mexican/Chicana/o celebration of the dead. His knowledge of tradition, symbolism, and ceremony made me reacquaint myself with what I had known as a child and had learned from my mother. Although my spiritual path had taken me to a more esoteric, metaphysical understanding, I began to see the importance of keeping this ancient tradition true and pure.

The story of the creation of the *Hijas de Juárez* exhibition begins with resistance, specifically artistic resistance. The *Hijas de Juárez* exhibit is about resisting the fact that horrible, heinous crimes are being perpetrated against humanity, and more specifically against Mexicanas at the U.S. border, and no one knows why, cares about it, or does anything to put an end to it. I was led on the path to Ciudad Juárez by Azul Luna.

I met Azul about four years ago, when she was still going by the name Gabriela Parra. We were matched up by my art representative Adrian Rivas to work with filmmaker Pocha Pena and photographer Vanessa Sepulveda to create a Chicano film festival in Gabriela’s neighborhood, called the First Annual Whittier Film/Video Festival, in the fall of 1999. My experience producing grassroots art events from conception through completion was coupled with her desire to bring a unique cultural experience to her community. My perception of Gabriela was that she was an extremely shy and kindhearted woman, yet strangely she seemed at the same time to possess great inner strength. Being a member of the unofficial Los Angeles network of Chicana/o artists, who are rich in ideas, human-power, commitment, and bartered resources (but very little more), I used my acquired guerrilla style of event planning to turn the Iguana Cantina Lounge, some student films, a first-time feature filmmaker’s premier, and an academic film instructor’s lecture into a memorable film festival evening. With this, I felt that Gabriela Parra had been baptized and given the beginning tools she would need to create her own future events. This is my way of giving to the community; this was the way I had been trained.

About a year later, Gabriela Parra (by then Azul Luna) contacted me regarding something that was going on in her hometown of Ciudad Juárez, Mexico. She wanted my input and resources to help her do something, yet could not explain over the telephone what she had in mind. I was skeptical. For me, my resources are like gold. I spend them wisely and judiciously, because I earn them by helping and bartering with fellow artists in the network,

and by nurturing important relationships. I was not ready to give them away so easily. I listened to Azul apprehensively. I certainly was not ready to join Azul in a collaborative effort where I provided all the work and she, all the issues that needed solving. My answer to her at that time was that she needed to show me what she was capable of and committed to doing.

I gave her some suggestions and contact names that would be helpful, but made it clear that she would have to explain what she wanted to do. Her purpose was still unclear to me, perhaps even to her at that time. We conferred by telephone for several months, and finally she decided that she would focus on organizing an art exhibit for her cause. It seems strange to say that, but this is the world of artists: eccentricities and creativity supercede rational thought. No one asks for clarification among artists, because either we are too self-absorbed or we can sense what the other is saying through some non-language of glances and actions. Azul enlisted a number of artists and executed a modest upstairs salon, one day only, followed by an evening of consciousness-raising visual and performance art. She called her group and the event itself “Viejaskandalosas.”³ Her informational art exhibit took place in the spring of 2001 at Self Help Graphics in East L.A. It was the first event in Los Angeles to focus public attention on the murders in Juárez.

The event’s opening was well received. The Spanish-language media was present to interview Azul. There was an information table with articles and flyers explaining what the victims’ families were attempting to do in Ciudad Juárez. Through these materials, I began to understand the vast injustices that were occurring not that far from us. While Azul was being interviewed by the Spanish news, I listened to the questions and answers she gave. The media seemed well aware of the murders in Juárez, but they were more curious to know why this woman and group of artists, hundreds of miles away from the crime scene, felt they could do anything. The exhibit was up for that one Saturday evening, and then just as quickly taken down. The issues lay quietly, like bones in the Chihuahua desert.

A few months later, Azul contacted me. This time she was planning a caravan to Ciudad Juárez and another art exhibit with a “weekend of awareness” at the Instituto Nacional de Bellas Artes (INBA), the Ciudad Juárez branch of Mexico’s national gallery. I met with Azul to discuss arrangements for the trip and the artists’ responsibilities. I don’t know whether it was my brain’s refusal to understand and believe the magnitude of the events of the last ten years in Ciudad Juárez, but nothing seemed clear. We had no idea what we would confront. In the middle of the night in February 2002, we made our way toward Chihuahua, toward the border.



Fig. 2. *Basura* (2002) by Jenina. Black and white photograph, 7.25" x 11".

Rigo Maldonado

In 1999 I started hearing stories of the disappearances of girls in the border town of Ciudad Juárez, Mexico. I heard these stories from family members, and blew them off as being part of another urban legend, like the infamous *chupacabra*.⁴ However, long after the *chupacabra* had been laid to rest, reports about the missing women in Juárez continued. I checked the archives of the *Los Angeles Times* and alternative newspapers, expecting to find that the stories were a hoax. I was not able to locate any news articles. Even the Internet presented few findings. The disappearances of the women in Juárez seemed surreal to me: How could this have been happening for the last ten years, and no one know about it? Would I hear of this horrific tale on an episode of *X-Files*, or were the women really disappearing?

I first met Victoria Delgado in 1996 at the *Borders, Barriers and Beaners: Attacking the Myths* exhibit at SPARC. The curator, art historian Reina Prado, asked me to create an altar for the exhibit. I decided I would dedicate an altar to Juan Soldado, the unofficial patron saint of immigration. At the time, xenophobic sentiments were proliferating throughout California, and Mexican and Latino immigrants were being targeted by legislative propositions that would negatively affect their health care and education.⁵ Juan Soldado represented the image of Mexican/Latino immigrants as scapegoats for political gain. This was the first time I has dis-

played an altar in a public setting. At the opening reception, Victoria came up to me and asked me many questions. I was very nervous, and did not know how to respond. I maintained my distance and did not say much for fear she might discover that I was not a “real artist.” I was like a deer in the headlights, frozen and in shock. I didn’t talk to Victoria much, and thought that I would never see her again.

The overall response to the Juan Soldado altar was very positive. I continued creating, mixing traditional elements with modern technology in the process of altar making. Many of the altars I have created have had themes of Chicano heroes and heroines, anti-immigrant propositions, gang violence, AIDS, drug and alcohol abuse, and suicide. Most of the altars have deep personal connections to me, and I experience the process of creating an altar as a form of healing.

Two years after my first exhibited altar, I was invited to be part of an exchange of Chicano/a artists in China. Victoria was one of twelve artists invited. I immediately made contact with her, and for ten days we talked about every facet of our lives. She showed me many mystical and spiritual things I had never heard of. She talked about organizing her own exhibits and had a great d.i.y. (do it yourself) attitude about everything she was involved with. After the trip to China, we maintained contact and knew that we would be collaborating and bringing our various talents together.

Two years later, in the spring of 2001, Victoria invited me to an event at Self Help Graphics organized by a group named *Viejaskandalosas*. The group included artists, writers, and performers who were trying to shed light on the disappearance of many women in Ciudad Juárez, Mexico. Artwork was sporadically displayed in the community room and very little was said about the disappearances in Juárez. *Viejaskandalosas* founder Azul Luna spoke of a weekend caravan that would travel from Los Angeles to Juárez for an art exhibit and a solidarity march in support of the missing women.⁶

More than a dozen people met on Olvera Street in Los Angeles for the caravan to Ciudad Juárez. Spanish-language media documented the few people who held signs that read “¡Ni Una Mas!” and “Justicia Para Las Mujeres de Juárez.” Many onlookers paid little attention to the signs, and some of the people who held the signs looked confused or unsure of what they were doing. Three vans and one car made up the caravan. Most of the people in the vans were artists who were going to perform at the Instituto Nacional de Bellas Artes. In the middle of the night, we embarked on the road trip that would reenergize my dormant activism.

Artists Raul Baltazar, Erika Elizondo, Victoria Delgadillo, and I drove for sixteen hours. To stay awake, we had many discussions, many of them having to do with gender, sexuality, and the essence of being Chicano/a. Before the road trip, most of our interactions had been at gallery events, parties, or other social gatherings. This was one of the first times we had been able to listen and talk to one another about growing up, our purpose as artists, and our ambitions in life. Through Victoria's knowledge of metaphysics, I learned about the importance of creating a balance in our artwork and activism. The next day we finally reached our destination: the El Paso–Juárez border.

As we crossed the *línea*, I noticed that the hills in Ciudad Juárez were packed with shanty homes built one on top of another. At the outer edges of town, iron gates surrounded nondescript buildings, which I assumed to be maquiladoras. Throughout the city, telephone poles were painted with black crosses on pink backgrounds.⁷ Some were barely noticeable, while others seemed freshly painted. One for each girl or woman who had died, we were told. As people went on with their daily activities, these crosses stood out. Along with the crosses, I noticed posters of missing girls. The handwriting said it all: *Se busca* or *La han visto?* Images of the girls varied from poster to poster. Some were pictured in school uniforms, others as *quinceañeras*; several identification photos had been enlarged, giving a ghost-like appearance to the missing. The crosses and posters made an inexplicable impact on me. I could not concentrate on why I was in Juárez, only on the crosses and the young girls' faces. I then realized that this was no longer a legend: it was true, in fact, that women were disappearing en masse in Ciudad Juárez.

That night we met with a group of local artists who housed us while we were in Juárez. The artists shared stories of horrific tales, some I had been hearing about. One story that was ingrained in my head was that of Armine. She lived next to a small creek with high vegetation. In the early hours of the morning she heard a woman cry out for help, screaming until her voice was muffled. Armine called the police, pleading that they investigate the cries. The police told her that the district she lived in was not in their jurisdiction and hung up the phone. Too fearful to act any further, Armine and her roommate did nothing more, nor did any of their neighbors. This had happened before; later they would read of another missing girl. There was an agreed-upon silence in Juárez. No one dared to speak out. "If one speaks out, they then have to live in constant fear that their life might be taken at any moment," we were told.

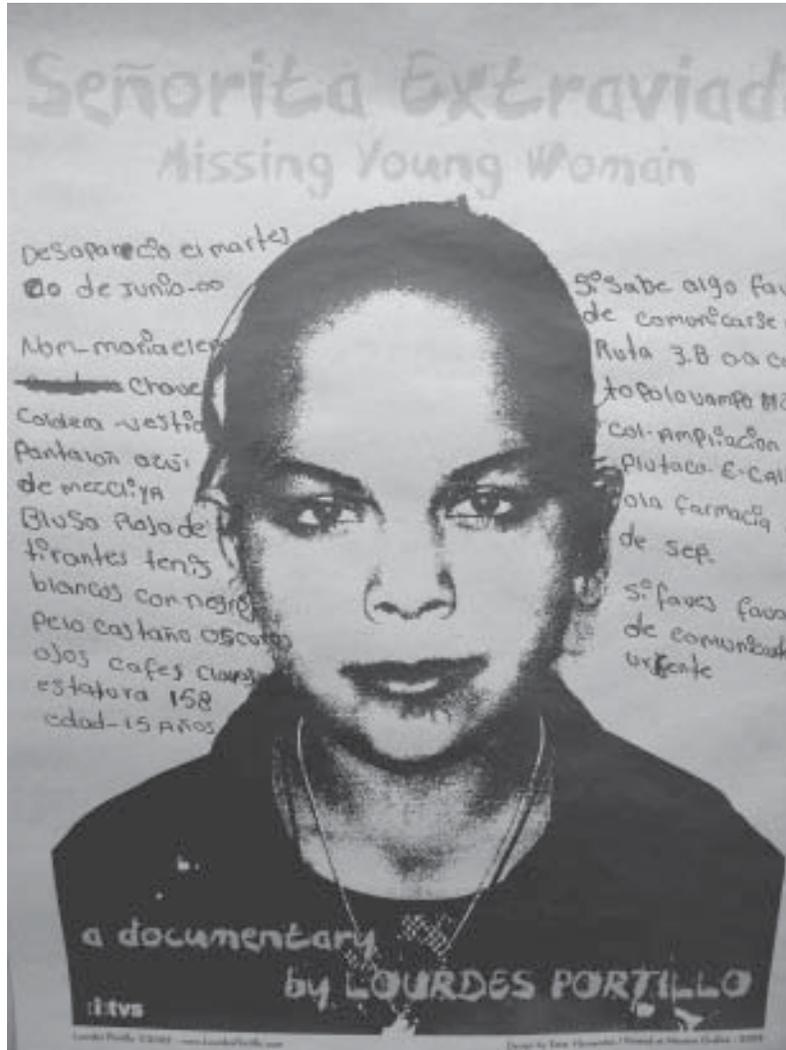


Fig. 3. *Missing Young Woman* (2001) by Ester Hernández from the film *Señorita Extraviada* and promotional poster. Screen print, 17" x 22".

Holding banners, we marched over the downtown bridge that ties Juárez to El Paso at the border. Some people honked their horns in support of our protest, while others ignored our pleas for justice. As we marched, some of us began to speak with mothers of the victims who marched along with us. One mother in particular spoke about how she blamed herself for

what had happened. This woman was the mother of Laura Berenice Ramos Monárrez. Erika interviewed the mother as she spoke of her daughter's love of Banda El Recodo and her dedication to the family. She said that she had felt guilty: God took her daughter because she was a bad mother.

Even the most basic conversation in Spanish separated Raul, Victoria, and myself from these mothers; our emotions and lack of vocabulary vexed us and prevented us from finding the appropriate words to offer sympathy. We stood in silence as we began to grasp the overwhelming magnitude of what these women were experiencing and the events that were plucking the lives of so many young women from Ciudad Juárez. The reported count of women found dead as of that date: 310. And hundreds more were still missing.

After marching in silence, Raul, Victoria, and I processed all of the information we had just received. As artists, we wanted to do something in return, to help the living victims and at the same time to honor the spirits of the women who were no longer there. The original concept was that Victoria and Raul would paint a portrait of Laura Berenice, and I would create a frame for it. After the portrait was complete we had an idea to do a caravan through California, Arizona, New Mexico, Texas, and then into Juárez. We would stop in major cities and use the portrait to bring attention to the violence that was occurring in Juárez. The final stop would be in Laura Berenice's neighborhood, where the portrait would be on permanent display.

The ride back home was quiet: this horrific tale of murdered and missing women had become true. We returned to Los Angeles a little drained but full of hope. The images of the land, the people, the crosses, and women kept appearing in my mind. When I



Fig. 4. *Naceran Flores* (2002) by Chisco. Papier maché three-dimensional sculpture, 2' x 3'. Photo by Rigo Maldonado.

closed my eyes, I would see the images of the women and imagine their final moments on earth. We could not hold our silence, and began talking to friends, colleagues, and family. With our creative energies, we were determined to expose the issue in Los Angeles to create international pressures, and to help our people in Ciudad Juárez.

My exposure to the art world began with a high school field trip to the Wight Gallery at the University of California, Los Angeles. The CARA (Chicano Art Resistance and Affirmation) exhibit finally validated my existence through the eyes and hands of other artists. The artwork exhibited challenged many stereotypes of Chicanos and Chicanas. We were no longer depicted as *la Virgen de Guadalupe* or as Aztecs carrying a princess. Our art was no longer just the plaster figurines you could buy at the border with Tijuana. The CARA exhibit affirmed our political, social, historical, and cultural contributions to the United States. My understanding of art as being only for rich white people and inaccessible to everyone else was broken that day. I no longer had to imagine myself in drawings and paintings in galleries and museums; the images I saw that day represented my political, social, and cultural being.

Of all the works at the gallery, the one with which I felt most connected was Amalia Mesa-Bains's installation titled "An Ofrenda to Dolores del Río." The artist had conceptualized the altar as the movie star's dressing table, complete with trinkets, photographs, and even a cup of real coffee, as though the actress had simply stepped out of the room and would return to finish applying her makeup. I stood in front of the altar for half an hour, absorbing every little detail of the installation: the way the fabric draped, how the items were placed and the imagery used, the pervasive smell of rose petals gathered in clumps at the foot of the table. The piece gave me a nostalgic feeling and a feeling of deep connection because I had done this type of artwork all along. As I stood in front of Mesa-Bains's masterpiece, I thought to myself, "I have been an artist all my life. I just didn't know I was creating art."

When I was growing up, my family's use of religious iconography throughout the house made our home look like an installation. As a child, I spent hours arranging and rearranging the santos, never realizing I was creating displays in my own home. After the CARA exhibit, I began researching my cultural traditions, and found one in particular that I did not know much about. I began to focus my research on the Day of the Dead. In 1994, after a friend's tragic death due to gang violence, I remembered Mesa-Bains's altar to Dolores del Río. Immediately I started collecting photographs, items my



Fig. 5. *Para las muertas ofrenda* (2002) by Ofelia and Elena Esparza (master altar makers). Mixed media installation, 10'h x 18'w x 6'd. With *Laura Berenice* (2002) by Victoria Delgadillo. Acrylic and collage, 4' x 4'. Photo by Jennifer Araujo.

friend liked when he was alive, and created my first altar. Like many artists, I used the process of creating as a form of spirituality and healing.

Nowadays, however, the Day of the Dead has become a commercial commodity throughout California. Sponsors have seized on it as another opportunity to market their products to the Chicano community. On the 2002 Day of the Dead in Los Angeles, an altar competition was held at the Hollywood Cemetery with a \$1,000 cash prize. The winning entry was an altar dedicated to actress Hattie McDaniels. Watermelons, black-faced stereotypical images, and fried chicken decorated the elaborate altar. In the center lay a coffin. Inside the coffin was a skull with a red handkerchief tied around it, adding to the Aunt Jemima syrup bottle caricature. The artist was dressed in a green "Southern belle" dress and enormous bonnet, wailing over the coffin. When asked why he decided to dedicate the altar to Hattie McDaniels, the artist stated, "I had the antebellum dress!" I felt ill. Not only was it insulting to the memory of Hattie McDaniels to display her as nothing more than a wide-eyed servant, it was insulting to the celebration as a whole. Day of the Dead has been attracting mainstream artists, New Agers, Goths, and many who have no idea of the importance and traditions of the celebration. Sponsors are treating it as another Cinco de Mayo, another opportunity to

sell beer, food, and unnecessary trinkets. In a Day of the Dead celebration, a life deserves neither prize money nor ranking.

When Judy Baca, creative director of the Social and Public Art Resource Center, asked me to curate an exhibit for SPARC's Day of the Dead show, I knew I did not want to perpetuate this commercialized aspect of the celebration. I had never been a curator, but felt that this show was something that needed to be done. Given SPARC's commitment to provide exhibition space for art addressing social and political issues, I realized that this was a venue in Los Angeles that I could use to bring a greater awareness of the tragedies that were occurring in Ciudad Juárez. I agreed to curate a Day of the Dead show at SPARC only if it dealt with the women of Juárez, and if I could co-curate it with Victoria. Both Victoria and I felt that the Day of the Dead was an appropriate and meaningful time to honor the more than 320 lives lost on the Juárez border. These women were never given a proper celebration of their lives; now it was their turn to have their names and stories known.

In the *Hijas de Juárez* exhibit, we wanted each artist to come up with his or her own conclusion about the violence that was occurring in Ciudad Juárez. We emphasized that it was not just a women's issue or a Mexican issue or a class issue: it was an epidemic of human rights violations that needed international pressure to be stopped.



Fig. 6. *Hijas de Juárez* (2002) exhibition logo (the eyes of Laura Berenice Monarréz) by ARTO (Rigo Maldonado, Victoria Delgadillo, Martín Sorrendeguy). Ink on paper.

Interview by Carolina Chávez

Carolina: Why the name *Hijas de Juárez*?

Rigo: We were stuck on the title and we really wanted a name that would honor the women, as well as bring awareness. We asked for help, and a friend, writer Aida Salazar, came up with the title *Hijas de Juárez*. It's a take on Mexican president Benito Juárez—Mexico's only indigenous president—and at the same time refers to Ciudad Juárez, where many young women come from poor, rural backgrounds. Most are indigenous, or what some people perceive to be indigenous. We wanted that kind of tag line off of the imagery of "Benito Juárez" and "Ciudad Juárez."

Victoria: Also, with the name of "Benito Juárez" there is a sense of revolution, a sense that the poor and the indigent do have the ability to change things, so this fulfilled many of the aspects we were trying to convey with this exhibit.

Carolina: At the time, were you conscious of the fact that most of those girls weren't from Juárez?

Rigo: No, but once we did more research, we found that a majority of the women weren't from Juárez, that they were coming from rural towns. Juárez was their final stop.

Victoria: I don't think it matters that they did not originate from Ciudad Juárez; it's where they wound up, where they wanted to go to be hopeful for their futures and their lives. But their aspirations didn't work out in the way they expected.

Carolina: What did you feel when you went to Juárez?

Victoria: Juárez seems to be some kind of harvesting field of young women, it's insane. I grew up on the border of San Diego and Tijuana, and I never thought something like this could happen where I grew up. This is really hard to fathom.

Rigo: Juárez is fascinating. When we were there, we went with a local citizen group on an expedition to try and find bodies or evidence on the outskirts of town. There we were, climbing up hills, and it's just amazing to see the panoramic difference. When you look south you see Juárez and the shanty homes, but if you look north, toward El Paso, it's very hopeful. You see all these buildings and freeways. It looks really beautiful in comparison. I think that these women may have hoped that one day they would cross over to the other side. Ciudad Juárez seems to be such a temporary, cardboard pit stop. It must be sad to be in that situation, where you are stuck somewhere, where the financial situation is very extreme, where it's

literally “the rich and the poor.” I would imagine it is like seeing your future and not really getting to it, because you’re stuck somewhere else.⁸

Victoria: And apparently, one of the *Hijas de Juárez* artists, following a community lead, saw that the alleged members of the cartel live in armed-guarded, gated communities! Someone took us past the home of the popular Mexican singer Juan Gabriel, near downtown Juárez. It looks like a Southern plantation, with huge columns in front. Then you see the living conditions for the women who work in the maquilas and live in those shantytowns.

Rigo: It seems like a movie. I had to go over there to see for myself. I didn’t have to see a dead body, but you sense it. People are scared and it’s sad to see people like that.

Victoria: Friends in Los Angeles asked me, what if you see a body when you go looking in the hills, won’t you freak out? I think I am—we are—so desensitized through our culture that I couldn’t say what I would feel. I had no thoughts on this question. I guess I felt that I would just have to experience it to know what to feel. In our culture we are very distrusting and everything is an “urban legend.” Things on TV don’t make complete sense. Television seems magical, with digital imagery and fantastical plots, nothing seems as if it could be real. Sometimes things we see on the news and through community lore also seem too bizarre to be real.

Carolina: So the show was a way of making it real?

Victoria: As artists we curated this art show because that’s what we do—we create awareness. We present images to people, that way they can see what’s taking place in our world and in ourselves.

Rigo: Hopefully *Hijas de Juárez* won’t be the end of it, and people will have the energy to do their own shows and partake in some type of activism.



Fig. 7. *NAFTA* (2002) by Daisy Tonantzin. Media installation, 10’h x 12’w x 6’d.

Carolina: How did you go about selecting the artists for the show?

Rigo: Most were personal contacts, friends, and people whose work we knew. Some of the artists were part of the exhibit that took place in February 2002 in Juárez, Mexico. Victoria was a part of that exhibit, which was curated by Viejaskandalosas.

Victoria: Once we told people our plans for this exhibit, artists would come up and say, “I’m a member of Viejaskandalosas,” which meant they had been in the first show in Los Angeles at Self Help Graphics. We tried to bring many of the people from the first show to this one, but we were limited by gallery space.

Rigo: Some of the artists were recommended by the SPARC artistic director, Judy Baca. We also had three artists from Mexico.

Victoria: The Mexican artists are from Juárez and are Azul’s contacts, she’s also from Juárez. When we went on the first trip in February 2002 to Juárez, we stayed with some artists there. It’s a community in transit because there are people coming and going, so it doesn’t feel like an established art community. I would imagine that this is just the nature of this town. There doesn’t seem to be a sense of “community” or a purpose bringing all the citizens together.

Rigo: We sensed that our presence really inspired them. There were two Chilean women, one an artist, the other a university administrator. We stayed with them and another group of women for the weekend. It was that weekend they began the process of mobilizing to do something. It was at the exhibit that Victoria was in, where they decided “we need to do something,” because they were not organized as a collective or as artists. They had never thought to work with each other on issues before.

Victoria: They had never used their art for political purposes. My experience of the Zapatista process was that I had to say something. Raul Baltazar and I stood up and spoke (in our pocho Spanish) to this group of artists, victims’ families, INBA gallery people, Spanish media people. I said that the Zapatistas say that any person, no matter how young or old, can perform one action to create change. Perhaps one can’t deal with all the issues, but any effort that one makes is part of creating a chain reaction for change. That is why we as artists did the exhibit at the INBA in Juárez, because that’s what we do—create art, and through that art, create awareness. This creation of awareness was what had brought us to Juárez. Raul also spoke of the creation of a respect for women and the responsibility of the community to honor its women through their deeds. At that moment the artists from Juárez spoke of forming a collective. The room, which had



Fig. 8. *Untitled* (2002) by Martin Sorrendeguy. Color photograph, 7" x 11".

been filled with quiet despair, began buzzing with hope and ideas. This year they had a Day of the Dead show. They are the ones who put that big crucifix on the border. This past year they also organized a protest of 300 women at the zócalo in Mexico City. They continue to strategize along with the activist groups in Juárez who are working hard at raising international consciousness about the issues. It's not as if we went over there and told them how to organize. It's more like there was a hopelessness and everything seemed impossible to them. Now they feel that they, as artists, are doing a little more for the community. That's good. It seemed a little more positive the second time we went to Juárez in October 2002.

Rigo: They just seemed really happy that we were supporting them. The Juárez artists said, "We need to do something now." It is really important that there is some international pressure. We, coming from L.A.—there were only twelve of us—saw that we made an impact just by going that one time. We let them know that we cared about this issue and that they were not alone. On our way back, Victoria, Raul, and I decided that we were going to do something more. We hadn't planned to create something large-scale like this exhibition. It was going to be a public art piece in which Victoria and Raul would paint a portrait of one of the victims and I would make a frame around it, to hold candles and flowers. The idea was that the piece would be displayed in the neighborhood where the mother lives, to keep her daughter's memory alive. During the march in Juárez

Raul's girlfriend Erika Elizondo, a performance artist, started talking to one of the mothers. This woman was the mother of victim Laura Berenice Monárrez. The story was so sad and "real" to us that we became involved with her and them instantly. Erika's excellent Spanish skills and translations for our benefit moved our hearts and thoughts so deeply. Laura Berenice is the image we used throughout the gallery; on the event publicity, especially, we used her eyes. That is how the idea for the exhibit started, through this portrait. The more we talked about it, the more it was an opportunity for us to bring this issue of greater awareness to L.A. People still had questions. Lourdes Portillo's film (*Señorita Extraviada*) was just starting to circulate. No one knew what to do or say about the crimes. We felt we wanted visuals to explain our stories of what was happening in Juárez.

Carolina: What kind of art were you expecting from your artists? Did you know what to expect?

Victoria: I know that *Señorita Extraviada* really influenced Consuelo Flores and Raul Baltazar. The piece that Raul did inspired the Killsonic group's performance at our Call to Action evening. So it's like the pieces worked off each other, the exhibition pieces and the performance pieces. Elena and Ofelia Esparza were called on to do their usual "paying of homage to



Fig. 9. *Juárez Landscape* (2002) by Rigo Maldonado. Installation, wood, latex paint, 20' x 26'. With performance artists Raquel Salinas and Adriana Alba Sanchez at exhibition opening. Photo by Ernesto Maldonado.

lost lives” through their altars. Now we could honor the lives of these young women of Juárez, pay our respects, because that’s what Elena and Ofelia could help us do; they are altar makers and we wanted and needed that element in our exhibit.

Rigo: The whole mother-daughter element was really important to us when we chose Ofelia and Elena Esparza to do the community altar. We were so moved by the painful story that Laura Berenice’s mother told us of her family. We thought it would be symbolic if Ofelia and Elena worked together to create this altar as a mother-daughter team. It was the first time they had ever worked on an altar together.

Carolina: How many artists were in the show?

Rigo: At first it was forty, then thirty, and then twenty artists.

Victoria: We could have gotten forty or more artists who would have loved to be in this exhibit, but the exhibition space wasn’t big enough. Many Los Angeles artists were very excited about this project and even though they weren’t part of it, they participated in the vigil, came to the reception, artists’ talk and performance fundraiser. I feel that the Juárez issue will reveal itself in the Los Angeles artists’ work.



Fig. 10. *El vientre del desierto* (2002) by Raul P. Baltazar. Watercolor, guache, salt, glitter, 38" x 49".

Carolina: Did the artists in the show already have something they were working on or did you ask them to produce something specifically for the show?

Rigo: It was a theme-based show. When we sent out our e-mail and contacted the artists we asked them to contribute to “a theme-based show” on the Juárez issue, but we really left it open to whatever they wanted to do. Some of the artists were kind of stuck, and asked me, “Where do we get the research? Tell me some more information.” We became the researchers, we became the source of all this information, so that they could produce their pieces.

Victoria: It took Rigo something like six hours to get the images that we used at the vigil, just to get to the FBI files with pictures. This whole thing called for a huge amount of computer research.

Rigo: You know? Then, there was not a lot of information available. Now, you can punch in Juárez and find so much out. Even before the show, it was really hard for us to get the research we needed. There were only two women I knew at the time who were doing active research: Lourdes Portillo, the filmmaker, and Diana Washington Valdéz, a reporter for the *El Paso Times*.

Carolina: Do you think an artist is responsible for doing more than just mirroring reality?

Rigo: Every artist has a process when he or she is working on a piece. I know that Raul was having so many issues with his piece, because of the really heavy and dark images he was working on. People were pissed off when they saw it. His watercolor has cartoon-like images of women being dismembered and cut up and it addresses issues of brutality, sexual abuse, corporate power, and exploitation. It also included an image of an indigenous women in the upper left section of the painting who appears to be trying to heal the situation in Juarez by symbolically covering the victims with a magical powder.

Victoria: Of all the pieces in the show, Raul Baltazar’s was the one people wrote about the most. I believe it was the one that made them think the most. People would gravitate to it. People got angry. Men were ashamed. Of all the pieces in the show, that one stood out because it told a whole story on its own. As Rigo said, we didn’t want people to come in and just say, “Oh, look how cute, look at the flowers,” or “That one makes me feel good,” without knowing what the issues are. This was our opportunity to let people know what the issues are. Victor Rosas had another thought-provoking piece we liked that wasn’t in our exhibit; it was banned from the Juárez show. It was a huge circle of women’s clothes sprinkled with blood, with one pair of factory worker’s shoes painted pristine white. In the middle of this circle of

clothes was a mirror and a huge penis on top of it. We just didn't have enough space at SPARC to put this one in the *Hijas de Juárez* exhibit.

Rigo: I was relieved that women came to the defense of Raul's piece because I didn't want this to turn into a "women's-only issue." Clearly men are also affected, not as much as women, but they are also being dehumanized. I think it was good that there were some women in the audience who came to the defense of Raul's piece at the community forum with the artists because, in essence, that created a dialogue.

Carolina: Other than raising consciousness, what did you want to get from this exhibit?

Rigo: If the whole show had been just about hope, I don't think it would have had the same impact. If everything had been all pretty, we would not have seen the reality of what was happening in Juárez. The reality is that women are being murdered and mutilated. I am glad that some of the pieces in the *Hijas de Juárez* exhibit were horrible. I know that the first time I saw Raul's piece, I got sick to my stomach, but that's exactly what we saw in Juárez.

Victoria: Or, at least what we felt in Juárez, all the fear that the people who live there have to deal with. The people we scanned the hills with, looking for bodies, are called *la banda civil*. They kept talking about civic pride, how they loved their city, how this horrible thing had come to their city, how embarrassed they were that we in Los Angeles would think that everyone from Juárez is a murderer or a horrible human being. It was overwhelming to see the sadness of these people, who with very few resources were trying to do something. They go to schools and talk to the kids about safety. They offer carpool services to girls coming home late at night from their shifts at the maquilas.

Rigo: They teach sex education and crime prevention in the schools. These are all volunteers, that is where the hope comes in, too, because we can't have this negative image of Juárez. Positive things are happening, people create their lives there, they have to have some type of hope to continue being part of that city.

Carolina: During your research did you have any emotional anxieties?

Rigo: Yes, especially when I was looking through the FBI files. I was doing this at work and I would have to stop, I would get sick to my stomach seeing woman after woman. I went to this forensic website, and it showed how the women had died. My original artwork was going to be a torso and it was going to be body parts. I wanted to show the different ways the girls were being killed. I had to stop doing that because I was having night-



Fig. 11. *¡Justicia!* (2002) by Yreina Cervántez. Mixed media 28" x 38". Photo by Victoria Delgadillo.

mares. I started worrying about my family, especially my three older sisters. It was like, "Wow this could happen to my sisters." I was really emotional and distressed. I have never put so much emotion into organizing a show. **Victoria:** I think in the beginning I was a lot angrier. "This is the genocide of women," I kept saying, "it's a holocaust of women." I was very angry, and

Rigo would say, “Well, we don’t know. We can’t assume who the people are that are doing this, or for what reason. So let’s allow the artists to explore that themselves.” So that’s why the pieces are so diverse and the artists show a lot of different interpretations of what’s going on.

Carolina: Up to now how important do you think the role of the artist has been in raising social consciousness about the crimes?

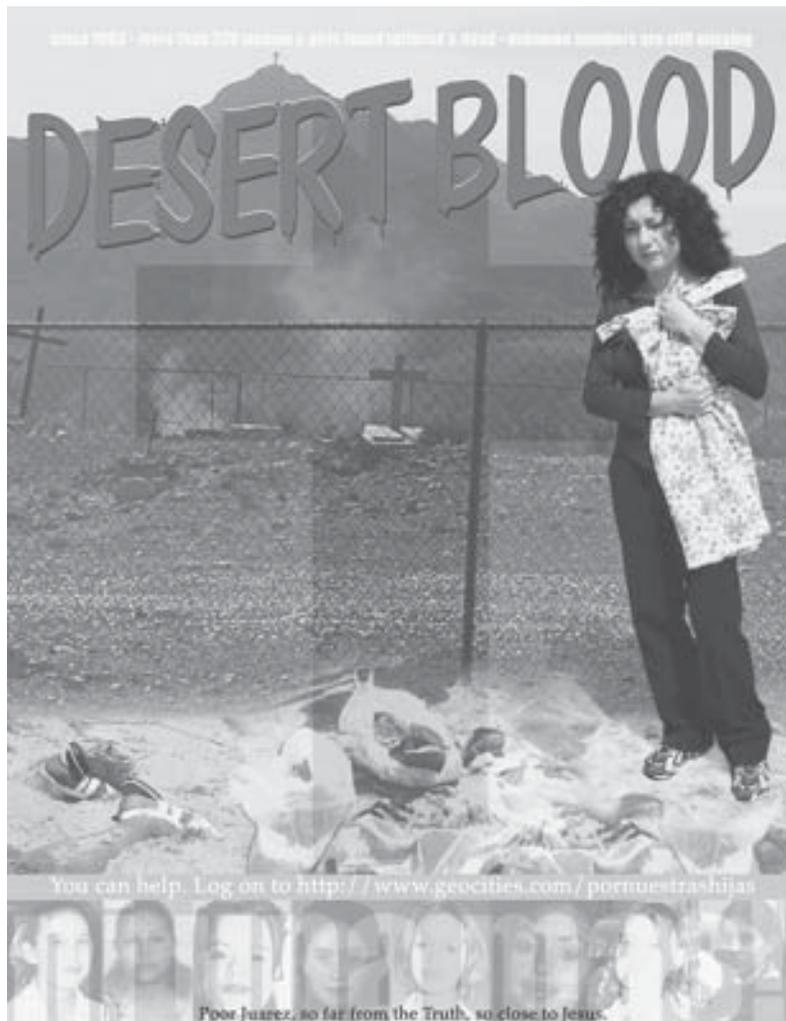


Fig. 12. *Desert Blood* (2002) by Alma López. Digital art print, 18" x 24". Photo by SPARC staff.

Rigo: I think that we have reached people who would not have been reached otherwise. It's not a Latino thing, it's not a woman thing, it's a humanity thing. We have people from all walks of life coming to the gallery. One thing that we planned was having the vigil on December 12, which is one of the sacred days for Latinos, el Día de la Virgen de Guadalupe. That was really important, because we reached people who would never go to a gallery. We had the vigil on Olvera Street. We weren't trying to disrespect the virgin, but we wanted to make people aware.

Victoria: One of the big things that this show accomplished was that the City Council of Los Angeles is in the process of mailing a resolution to President Fox of Mexico, asking him to investigate the murders. This was done on behalf of the *Hijas de Juárez* exhibit. A professor came from Ohio and asked us if her University of Dayton art students could create an exhibit (using the same title) to create awareness on this issue in their state. We thought that was a great idea. Similarly, other activists, and offers to help create awareness, came from places we didn't expect. People need to become aware in order to make something change. We need to make those who are doing this afraid. We were featured on PBS, and a Los Angeles judge came up to me and thanked me for bringing this issue to the community. She felt it was very important.

Rigo: I wanted people to be angry and pissed off when they came out of the gallery, especially looking at Victor's torso and Raul's painting, in which you see these women being dismembered and cut up. And, I believe that is what happened. I think that when people become angry, they are more apt to do something. When people walk out of a gallery and say, "Oh, I saw these pretty landscapes," they saw something pretty and that's it. When you walk out of the gallery angry, the anger stays with you. It motivates you to take action.

Notes

1. With this exhibition and its related programming, SPARC launched a year-long effort known as the "Juárez Project" to bring awareness to the plight of the murdered women and to engage and mobilize the general public in Los Angeles on the issue. SPARC played an important role in providing vital funding, sponsorship, resources, and space for the exhibition, which is part of the twenty-six-year commitment SPARC has made to ensure that an alternative activist vision

sparks dialogue and community action. For more information, see the SPARC website at <http://www.sparcmurals.org>.

2. Visual artists were Adriana Alba-Sanchez, Yolanda Amescua, Judith F. Baca, Raul P. Baltazar, Yreina Cervántez, Victoria Delgadillo, Ofelia and Elena Esparza, Consuelo Flores, Ester Hernández, Jenina, Alma Lopez, Jose Lozano, Azul Luna, Rigoberto Maldonado, Francisco “Chisco” Ramirez, Martha Ramirez, Victor Rosas, T. Pilar, and Martin Sorrondeguy. Thinkagain was Daisy Tonantzin and Patricia A. Valencia. Musical Performers were the group Jarocho Candela, whose members are Xochi Flores, Angela Flores, Rocio Marrón, Cecilia Brennan, Angelica Loa, Nikki Campbell, Tianna Paschel, and Carolina Sarmiento. Performance artists were Erika Elizondo, Monica Barriga and the group KILSONIC, whose members are Eddika Organista, Frank Luis, Mike Ibarra, Dominique Rodriguez, Brian Walsh, Shane Jordan, and Minh Pham. Other participants were Raquel Salinas and Carmen Vega. Spoken word and readings were done by Alicia Gaspar de Alba, Consuelo Flores, and Claudia Rodriguez.

3. My understanding is that the collective name of “Viejaskandalosas” (scandal-mongering women) referred to what the authorities in Chihuahua called the victims’ mothers when they inquired about the disappearances of their daughters.

4. The chupacabra, or goatsucker, is a phenomenon that started in mid-1995 and became legendary in Central and South America, Puerto Rico, and the U.S. Southwest. Something strange was killing livestock (mostly goats), draining all their blood. The deaths were mysterious, and people became very frightened. I remember that during this hysteria a mother in Santa Ana, California would not allow her daughter to go to the prom because of fear of the chupacabra. It was so talked about that T-shirts, masks, movies, and even corridos were created to bring media attention to this creature.

5. Proposition 187, passed by an overwhelming majority of California voters in 1994, curtailed undocumented immigrants’ rights to public health care and education; Proposition 209, passed in 1996, ended affirmative action in admissions to the University of California; and Proposition 227, passed in 1998, hacked away at bilingual education.

6. This march was organized by the El Paso–based Binational Coalition for Ending Violence Against Women and Families on the Border.

7. I cannot stand pink anymore. I’m almost embarrassed in choosing that color to represent the women in Juárez, because I’m adding to the gender association that pink is for girls.

8. The University of Texas, El Paso lies directly across the border from some of the oldest and most established of the Juárez *colonias*, or shantytowns, underscoring the north/south and rich/poor differentials of that border.