

# Fowler exhibition spans the landscape of migration

Collection is a running narrative of the immigrant experience compiled from over 40 years of work

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A bloody body strewn against a barbed-wire fence, a smiling girl proudly holding up her green card, visions of an idyllic land, a lake of names – these are a few of the many images hanging at the newest exhibition at the Fowler Museum of Cultural History.

The exhibition, titled “Caras Vemos, Corazones No Sabemos/Faces Seen Hearts Unknown: the Human Landscape of Mexican Migration,” running at the Fowler Museum now through Dec. 28, chronicles the migration struggles of Mexican immigrants.

Starting from the risks within a perilous journey, to the difficulties in adapting to a foreign life, to finally trying to reconcile the past with the present, the exhibit portrays a side of human migration that has not been commonly focused on before in the United States.

“It is a moving way of approaching the issue of migration, reminding us all that it is not just political ... but it is a phenomenon that has a creative side, that has a powerful human side, that has culturally enriched this country,” said Amelia Malagamba, the curator of the exhibition.

In curating the show, Malagamba – a professor of Latino art history at Arizona State University – wanted to portray the many ways in which Latino artists dealt with the topic of migration.

“Even though it was touched upon, it wasn’t the focus (of an exhibition), so I really wanted to see how the artists touched upon the issue, speak the issue, deal with the issue,” she said.

“Caras vemos, corazones no sabemos,” which translates directly into “Faces seen, hearts unknown,” is a Mexican proverb. Traditionally, it means that one should not judge based on surface appearance alone but rather, one should go “into the heart of the community.”

In organizing the exhibit, Malagamba had access to over 7,000 objects within the collection of Dr. Gilberto Cardenas, a professor of sociology at the University of Notre Dame. Within these pieces – which included literature, paintings, installations, photographs and videos – the theme of migration spans a 40-year period.

“For the artists that are included in the exhibition, for many of them, it’s not a topic that is out of date – it is a topic that they have been dealing with since the late-1950s on to today,” Malagamba said. “So it’s a topic that has been in the minds of the artists, young and old, for a long time.”

The artists showcased within the exhibition range from older artists who have worked since the ’60s to younger, emerging artists who have only begun their careers five to 10 years ago. Ramon Ramirez is one of the latter, whose parents emigrated to the United States from Mexico before he was even born.

Despite being born and raised in Los Angeles, the effects of migration have stayed with Ramirez. In this case, the struggle is born from the aftermath of migration, in the process of trying to reconcile two identities: American and Mexican.

“I was born and raised in L.A. and I’m actually as American as you can get, but certain people will look at me

and think I'm a foreigner," he said, "I'm really not a part of L.A. but I am a part of L.A."

It is this divided sense of self that Ramirez sought to portray within his painting hanging in the exhibition. The 2006 painting, entitled "Coming Home," shows an old blue house with cracked walls within a small Mexican town. In front of the house stands an SUV.

The house in the painting is actually the house of Ramirez's father's back in Ayotlan, Mexico.

"Every time I go visit my dad's (old) town ... I feel like I'm a part of the land. My blood rushes to my feet and I feel really connected to the ground," he said, "But at the same time, people kind of look at me as a foreigner."

Before it came to UCLA, the exhibition debuted in 2006 at the Snite Museum of Arts at the University of Notre Dame and had a successful turnout of 35,000.

The opening of the exhibition at the Fowler includes a new installation by Maria Elena Castro entitled "Green, Go," which features blob-like colorful figures suspended in an underwater kingdom.

The message contained within the piece addresses a need: going for the green, a synonym for opportunity, wherever it lies, even if it may be in a foreign land. It is this drive towards prosperity, toward the foreign, that gives "Caras vemos" an almost global resonance.

"The phenomenon of migration, it is a global phenomenon because it has to do with issues of globalization," Malagamba said. "It's a topic that is of interest for artists in Germany, in France, in Spain, in other countries."

For Ramirez, the issue of globalization and migration is one that is extremely relevant and long-lasting.

"I think this exhibit is really important for everybody to see," he said. "Not just proponents of migration or opponents, I think it's critical that everybody comes to see the show, to be able to help them understand where they stand and ... how to push it forward."

"It's an issue that's simply not going to go away."