

Houston Art Exhibit Explores How for Immigrants, Home is ‘a Moving Target’

Timely and inherently political, “HOME—So Different, So Appealing” is a commanding exploration of the ways in which home forms our identity.

by Roxanna Asgarian (<https://www.texasobserver.org/author/roxanna-asgarian/>)

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Livia Corona Benjamin, 47,547 Homes, 2000, C-Print, ed. 5+2 AP, courtesy of the artist and Parque Galeria. © 2009 LIVIA CORONA BENJAMIN

In 2009, Camilo Ontiveros, a Mexican-born American artist, had become enamored with the pickup trucks he'd seen driving from Los Angeles to Tijuana, their beds piled high with a jumble of belongings and tied down with rope. A graduate art student at UCLA at the time, he used the inspiration for his final thesis:

“Temporary Storage” was a sculpture made up of the contents of his home — an old TV, a smushed mattress, a bicycle — bound with rope and set on two sawhorses.

That was the piece the curators of “HOME—So Different, So Appealing,” a Museum of Fine Arts Houston (MFAH) exhibit of 39 Latin American and U.S. Latino artists exploring the theme of home, were expecting when they reached out to Ontiveros to include his work in the show. But what they got instead is a different jumble of possessions, one that’s a punch in the gut in light of our political moment.



Camilo Ontiveros, Temporary Storage: The Belongings of Juan Manuel Montes, 2009, personal belongings of Juan Manuel Montes, rope, metal sawhorse, aluminum base, and wood sculpture, courtesy of the artist. © CAMILO ONTIVEROS / PHOTO © MUSEUM ASSOCIATES/LACMA

“Temporary Storage: The Belongings of Juan Manuel Montes” is a re-creation of Ontiveros’ earlier work, made with what Montes, the first known DACA recipient to be deported under the Trump administration, left behind in his Southern California bedroom. A twin bed, complete with a blue plaid comforter, is wrapped up with a flat-screen TV, boxing gloves, a basketball. There’s a tae kwan do uniform with blue, yellow, orange and white belts. A photo of a young Montes peeks out from behind a full-length mirror. Several dress shirts are still on their hangers. It all balances precariously on the sawhorses, an allusion, says Ontiveros, to the lives of immigrants, “for whom home is a moving target or temporary condition.”

The sculpture is one of the first things you see when you enter “HOME,” on display through January 21. The exhibit first ran at Los Angeles County Museum of Art, and was jointly curated by the MFAH’s Mari Carmen Ramírez (whom the *Observer* wrote about (<https://www.texasobserver.org/adios-utopia-hello-texas/>) in March), UCLA Chicano studies expert Chon A. Noriega and Pilar Tompkins Rivas, director of the Vincent Price Art Museum in Los Angeles. The work in the exhibit spans seven decades and includes artists from Argentina, Brazil, Colombia, Cuba, Guatemala, Mexico, Puerto Rico, the United States, Uruguay and Venezuela.

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The show ties together themes of the physical space of home with the concepts of homelessness, identity and leaving home behind. Much of this is inherently political. A series of photographs by Livia Corona Benjamin from her work “Two Million Homes for Mexico” depicts Mexico’s public housing boom, in which millions of homes were built for farmworkers who were pushed into urban centers during Vicente Fox’s presidency. The photographs show cookie-cutter homes with little or no access to schools, public transit or stores. “These are not the neighborhoods of a ‘Home Sweet Home’ dream fulfilled,” the artist writes, “but are ubiquitous grids of ecological and social intervention on a scale and of consequences that are difficult to grasp.”



Johanna Calle, *Obra negra*, 2007–08, galvanized wire, copper, and Chinese ink on cardboard, 77 drawings, the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, Museum purchase funded by the Caribbean Art Fund and the Caroline Wiess Law Accessions Endowment Fund. © JOHANNA CALLE

As viewers walk beyond the front room, the show's focus shifts to blueprints and architectural elements, which can seem impersonal next to a sculpture like "Temporary Storage." But there are examples of how focusing on form can provide a much deeper sense of what home feels like. In Carmen Argote's "720 ft. Household Mutations, Part B," the artist removed carpeting from her childhood home, painted much of it white and hung it like a canvas. Argote, who talked about her work at a November 16 press preview, mapped the origin of each piece of carpet. "This was the room my sister and I shared," Argote said. "And this was the kitchen — you can see the stains of grease showing through the paint." The overall effect makes for an unexpectedly visceral understanding of the recorded memory of home life.

Abraham Cruzvillegas' "Autoconstrucción" continues the theme of imbuing feeling into the form of home, and serves as one of the show's centerpieces. Modeled after the shantytowns of the artist's youth in Mexico City, the large sculpture incorporates wooden crates and makeshift structures, which mingle with a shopping cart, sweaters tied into something like a clothesline and an old TV showing performance art. Co-curator Ramirez spoke about the widespread shantytowns throughout Mexico and Latin America. "Although it looks chaotic from the outside, it's just the opposite. They have their own organization, their own systems of government," Ramirez said. "And the house, the house is never finished."



Pepón Osorio, *Badge of Honor*, 1995, installation and video projection, courtesy of the artist. © PEPÓN OSORIO / PHOTO © MUSEUM ASSOCIATES/LACMA

Puerto Rican artist Pepón Osorio's installation, "Badge of Honor," explores the feelings between an incarcerated father and his son back at home. Osorio traveled between father and son and filmed their questions and responses to each other. The son's video plays in a re-creation of his room, which feels like a time machine to 1995 — the "athletic baroque" of the son's room includes trophies, playing cards and

posters straight out of the '90s. In the adjacent room, the father's video plays in a re-creation of his cell, with an empty pair of shoes, a few packs of cigarettes and a bucket. At one point the father cries; the son says, "I would be willing to give up anything for you to be home."

Finally, on the back wall of the exhibit, are some of the most powerful images in the show. Ramiro Gomez is a former nanny who takes glossy spreads of perfect homes from magazines and paints in the invisible laborers. The women are faceless, often with their backs turned, mopping floors and playing with babies. Gomez told the *Los Angeles Times* (<http://beta.latimes.com/entertainment/arts/la-et-cam-ramiro-gomez-paintings-david-hockney-20160502-snap-story.html>) that he was inspired by looking at copies of *Architectural Digest* laying around the house he worked in while the kids he cared for took their naps. "It was looking at these environments minus all the people I was working with. It was an erasure of us. So it became very clear what to add," Gomez said. "It was this simple act. It was just inspired by saying, 'I'm here. We exist.'"

Taken as a whole, the exhibit is a commanding exploration of the ways in which home forms our identity — and how a lack of home ruptures it. "Home can mean many things," said Ramirez. "A chair, a smell, a remembrance. A house, a neighborhood, a city. A homeland."

Roxanna Asgarian is a journalist based in Houston.

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