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Protest artist's cardboard cutouts draw attention to immigration issue



By [David Montgomery](#), Published: February 13

As senators opened the immigration reform debate with a hearing Wednesday morning, spectral sentinels last seen in the Hollywood Hills and on Rodeo Drive began appearing on Capitol Hill.

They were life-size and two-dimensional, made of cardboard and acrylic paint: A fruit-picker in the grass before the East Front of the Capitol. A farm worker leaning against a rail outside the Rayburn Building. The day before, a painted Latino family of four took its place among the tourists taking pictures through the White House gate.

Ramiro Gomez Jr., an artist from Los Angeles, had brought his “interruptions,” as he calls them, to Washington.

The point was to make the invisible visible, Gomez said.

“It’s my hope to get people to stop and stare at these pieces so the next time they see a real person working, it pauses them as well,” Gomez said. “There’s a humor involved with it, rather than standing with a sign and yelling. I feel that’s needed for such poisonous issues.”

In L.A., [Gomez](#), 26, is starting to make a name in academic and artistic circles for his pop-up portraits of Latino laboring characters, which he disperses in rich neighborhoods and outside fancy stores in Beverly Hills. His rendering of, say, the gardener he planted near George Clooney’s house or his tableau of a janitor installed outside a Fred Segal store on Melrose Avenue, is meant to remind people of those who help make their lives so comfortable. The placement of the art is unauthorized, and property managers tend to take it down within a day or so. Gomez memorializes each work’s brief existence with photos, which then circulate on the Internet.

Gomez was invited to town by the National Day Labor Organizing Network, part of a coalition demanding a halt to deportations that brought 200 activists to attend the hearing and lobby this week.

In Washington, the results were mixed. Gomez’s installations kept falling victim to wind gusts and vigilant security. He had lengthier interactions with the Secret Service and Capitol Police officers than with curious bystanders.

And yet, by the end of the mission, the act of deploying the art itself seemed a victory to Gomez. He took his digital photos, and scores of immigrants — many undocumented and some facing deportation — visiting the Hill took heart from just the idea of this son of Mexican immigrants running around town with portraits of people like them.

“It’s a very expressive way to demonstrate to people that the invisible can become visible,” said Tomas Martinez, 49, an activist with a radio program in Georgia who came for the hearing. “He knows how to project his art, and he’s doing it with a strong message.”

Still, Washington is not a subtle town. In Lafayette Square, Gomez was competing with a guy holding a sign that said, “Stop the CIA’s Brain Bug Implanting.” And on Capitol Hill, he hauled his fruit-pickers past a bearded fellow with a backpack and a sleeping bag and a sign that said, “The State of the Union Would Be Better with Fairly Bright Hobo as Dictator.”

The other immigrant-rights advocates also carried signage: “We have a dream too.”

Gomez, though, never uses words. Sometimes he doesn’t even stick around to explain his art. The power of his work lies in his guerrilla subtlety, critics say. His first solo gallery show — called “Luxury, Interrupted” — opens next week at the [UCLA Chicano Studies Research Center](#), which is archiving digital images of his work.

“There’s a long, honorable tradition of public art that he inherits, but he’s doing something that is so different, and is so imaginative, and is so much of this moment,” said George Lipsitz, a professor of sociology and black studies at the University of California at Santa Barbara.

“The art that he creates is very different from a political mural or a silk screen. And very different from the traditions I learned in the ’60s and ’70s, when I saw political artists advancing their ideas,” Lipsitz said. “There are never any words, never an Aztec eagle or an American flag. What Ramiro does through these images is assert a kind of common destiny. People who hire people to clean houses have to share social space with the images of people they don’t usually talk to. It’s an interesting provocation.”

Gomez’s father, a truck driver, and his mother, a janitor, came to the United States without documents. They achieved legal status and became citizens. Gomez and his two younger sisters were born in San Bernardino.

Gomez left art school without graduating. He became a full-time babysitter, now earning about \$15 to \$20 an hour, he said. His partner of seven years is an editor in film and television.

At a live-in babysitting job for a family in the Hollywood Hills a couple of years ago, he got to know the gardener, the housekeeper, the pool-cleaner. The family had luxury home decor magazines lying about. Gomez started painting acrylic portraits of the domestic workers on the glossy pages, inserting them into a luxury context.

The next step seemed natural. He started deploying life-size portraits in real-life moneyed environments. He used recycled cardboard because it was free — and because it was as disposable as some people feel immigrant workers are, in his view.

“My cutouts in Beverly Hills are there between when the gardener cut the hedge and when he comes back to cut it again,” Gomez said. “It’s that invisible space in between that nobody sees. With a cutout, I can at least represent that work.”

After scouting the White House on Monday, he called up on his iPhone a Gordon Parks photo he loves that shows African American children looking through a fence at a fair from which they have been excluded. Painting until 4:30 a.m. Tuesday on cardboard he scrounged from a Costco, he created a Latino family inspired by the Parks photo.

Tears welled in his eyes when he unveiled the portrait in a meeting room at the Washington Hilton on Tuesday, before an audience of immigrant activists. The cutouts represented his own family, he said, and the families of everyone in the room.

Shortly after, he crossed Lafayette Square with his group portrait under his arm, imagining the reaction he would like to spark.

“What I hope is this image translates in some way,” he said. “Whether it’s just the image of a family, or if they catch the skin color connection and understand the timing to the Senate hearing.”

He propped up the figures on the low wall that supports the black fence and stepped back.

Before long, some tourists asked whether they could move the Latino family to the side so they could get a better angle for a photo of the White House. The wind kept blowing the cardboard figures down.

“Do you have a cause?” asked an Australian with a University of Queensland sweatshirt.

“A lot of it has to do with immigration reform,” Gomez replied.

“We have our own immigration issues,” the Australian said.

Soon, a Secret Service officer said no signs were allowed on the sidewalk. Gomez could either move his painting back onto the Pennsylvania Avenue plaza or be arrested, the officer said.

Somewhat dejected, Gomez moved to another section of the fence. A different officer let him pose and photograph the cutouts for several minutes as the setting sun glinted off the White House. Cheered at this touch of official empathy, Gomez shook the officer’s hand and explained, “I’m an artist.”

By Wednesday morning, he was outside the Capitol with his fruit-pickers.

“You must have skipped your day in woodshop,” joked a Capitol Police officer as Gomez clumsily used a rusty wooden saw to trim the stake that would support one of the figures in the grass. “You’re well within your rights, but you can’t dig anything into the ground.”

Gomez is used to having grass in which to plant his figures. He tried putting the stakes in a ventilation grate. The pickers made a striking image, profiled against the Capitol.

A man on a tour broke from his group and came hurrying across the grass toward the artist. He took a quick look at the figures and said, “Oh, never mind.”

Gomez said he was sure more people would notice if he could leave his fruit-pickers all day. But he couldn’t anchor them properly. The L.A. artist was somewhat unprepared for conditions on the ground in the District. Lesson learned, he said.

He thought of the immigrants who had cheered his project so emotionally the day before and who now were in the hearing room.

“The act itself is powerful,” Gomez said, as he harvested his fruit-pickers.

“When the image gets circulated, people will see it was in front of the Capitol. Then the audience will be the ones who aren’t here.”

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