

# TIJUANA MAKES ME HAPPY

## Pastiches, Palimpsests, and Cultural Sampling<sup>1</sup>

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▲ Julio Orozco, *Mexico, Beautiful and Beloved*, 1990 (gelatin and silver on paper).

*Tijuana makes me happy.*  
Pepe Mogt

The question repeats and repeats itself: What is going on in Tijuana? Why did it become the global world's emblematic border? What makes up its cultural singularity? In many ways, Tijuana seems to represent the persistence of a *strange new world*.

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All photos are courtesy of the Tijuana Cultural Center and its Documentary Visual Arts Archives and from the book *Obra negra. Una aproximación a la construcción de la cultura visual de Tijuana* (Mexico City: Consejo Nacional para la Cultura y las Artes, 2011).

### TIJUANA: BORDERS, GAPS, AND STEREOTYPES

The border is a predictor of social scenarios that develop later in other contexts. This is the case with the expansion of the *maquiladora* industry, initiated with the 1965 Border Industrialization Program, an industry that now exists in many non-border Mexican cities and in other countries, with the resulting work-place flexibility and increased labor vulnerability. There are also transnational phenomena among the youth, like the *cholos* and the Mara Salvatrucha gangs, recreated in Central America.

The border is no longer the foremost, practically exclusive place for consuming U.S. products, which now circulate through all Latin American cities. The reception of radio and televi-



Manuel Varrona, *In God We Trust*, 101 x 76 cm (acrylic on canvas). ▶



▲ Miguel Nájera, *Northern Border*, 1991 (oil and acrylic on plywood).



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sion broadcasts from “the other side” is also no longer limited to the border area, because cable, satellite, and electronic systems make access more equal, particularly for the upper and middle classes.

Different border processes have stopped being border processes as they move beyond the trans-border and transnational to become key to globalized processes and central twenty-first-century reference points. Outstanding among these are migration; trade transactions, both legitimate and illicit; social inequalities; and the intensity of intercultural processes. The latter have been particularly relevant on the Tijuana-San Diego border and played an intense part in the redefinition of imaginaries that have accompanied Tijuana. Among these, we can underline the following:

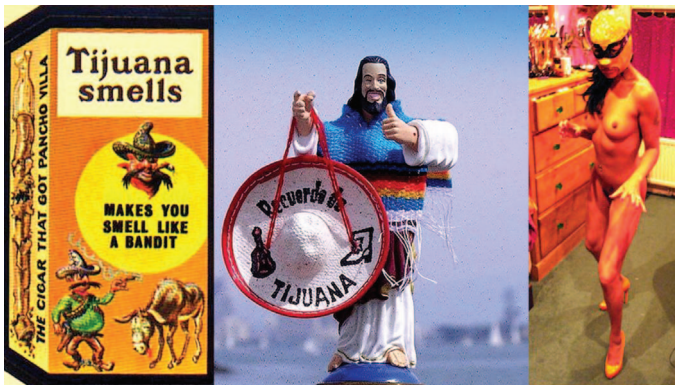
*Migration:* The articulation among factors like population growth, increasing inequality and poverty, and the absence of decent life choices for millions of human beings form the basis for intense migration from poor to the more advanced countries. This characterizes an important part of the twentieth century and is central to the definition of the twenty-first.

California’s economic weight has been enormously attractive to workers from Mexico and other Latin American countries, workers who travel seeking better living conditions and have made migration very visible. Hundreds of thousands of people trying to get into the United States have moved across land borders. Just two decades ago, half of the migrants who were trying to jump to “the other side” without documents went through Tijuana. The intense trans-border traffic between





▲ Juan Zúñiga, *Land and Freedom*, 1987 (mural).



▲ Gerardo Navarro, *Tijuana Kitsch*, no date (collage), at Arteslista.com.



▲ Ignacio Habrika, *The Nightmare*, 2009 (acrylic on wood).

Tijuana and San Diego makes for diverse forms of social interaction and human relationships that on a daily basis define their commercial, cultural, and emotional scenarios.

Transborder movement is also identified by the *cruces* [in Spanish, both crosses and crossings], painful marks on the border wall that indicate more than 7 000 dead in the attempt to cross the border since the beginning of Operation Guardian in 1994, which increased undocumented migrants' vulnerability and the number of their deaths.

*Social Inequalities.* The border not only defines different national states with different languages and cultures. It also expresses the adjacency of great inequalities and social asymmetries. It has been a floodgate that contains and regulates multiple diversities, both in the Mexico-U.S. relationship and in its condition as a restraint for people who, in the process of moving north, decide to stay on the Mexican border.

The border has been sensitive to U.S. economic and social processes that have had an influence as elements of attraction, containment, or socio-demographic expulsion. Some of the outstanding among these are attraction to the labor market in agriculture and services, the demand for Mexican workers linked to the needs of an expanding economy, and those associated with U.S. workers and young men going into the armed services during the two world wars. But it has also been affected by opposite phenomena, like the expulsion of Mexicans during economic recessions (particularly during Operation Wetback in 1952) or containment mechanisms and control of migratory flows, among which is the re-signification of the border from the perspective of national security and geo-political changes.

The asymmetry of Mexico and the United States is not the only thing made visible on the border. Internal inequalities are also expressed there, inequalities linked to important mi-





▲ Lula Lewis, *In a Vacant Lot*, 2002  
(acrylic on wood).

Tijuana cultural sampling  
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▲ Jason Thomas Fritz, *Big Gal* (digital photograph).

gratory flows that defined the population profiles of border cities, influenced by immigration from different states in Mexico's central highlands and South.

Thus, even today, half the population living in Tijuana was born in a different city.

#### INTERCULTURAL PROCESSES

Life on the border has been strongly defined by intercultural processes that are part of its singular construction of the meaning and significance of life. These relationships are neither general nor homogeneous: many ways of signifying the border world exist, from the perspectives of the indigenous peoples and communities, the diverse styles and identities of the young, regional or class traits, cultural capital, or gender. Some ele-

ments belonging to the cultural repertoires of the border have been part of the definition of the semanticized thresholds of adscription and differentiation from which the border condition and its distances from other cultural forms of Mexico and the United States have been interpreted.

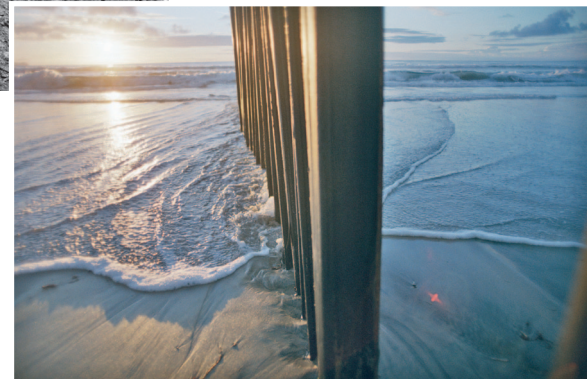
From the stereotyped perspectives predominant in Central Mexico, economic and commercial exchanges were covered up by the furtive, illegitimate, illegal transactions expressed in contraband, bootleg items, and drug trafficking. Fascination and moral condemnation, recognizable expressions of the dialectic of fear, defined the stigma imposed on certain border cities and very particularly on Tijuana. Since then, and with the stimulation of diverse literary, journalistic, and cinematographic recreations, the border became the region of evil, marked by a sordid history of vice, prostitution, immorality, violence, and the absence of values.





▲ *Elsa Medina, Migrant, 1987*  
(gelatin and silver on paper).

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▲ *Elsa Medina, Border Fence between Mexico and the United States, 2007* (gelatin and silver on paper).

## THE CITY'S SOCIO-CULTURAL CONSTRUCTION

The border has been a space associated with threats, de-nationalization, and cultural indigence: Mexican educator and philosopher José Vasconsuelos said that Northern Mexico is where culture ends and barbeque begins. This idea has been reiterated by different officials who have denied that “cultural or artistic manifestations” could develop along the border, and this perspective fed the representation of Mexico’s North as a desert.

An important part of the urban border profile involves the needs of the service sector, but the socio-cultural construction of the space was also defined by urban struggle and the unrestrained demand for land, housing, and services.

The condition of the border played an important role in the use of objects and materials utilized and their conversion into options for housing by the poor, who live in cars, trucks, campers, motor homes, and other junked vehicles. Together with them, the purchase of second-hand houses

became an important option for cheap housing for the poor. However, in the early 1970s, importing used houses was banned, arguing that they were “unsanitary.” Intense conflicts also exploded due to demands for housing and public utilities combined with official urban reordering policies and government and the business community’s interest in appropriating land with high commercial value where poor people were living. These conflicts became especially tense and dramatic in the Tijuana River Zone, which witnessed many clashes, injustices, and deaths over which the city’s modern profile was paved.

Tijuana reordered its urban spaces and social stumbling blocks through the expansion of the *maquiladora* industry. This was the expression of new global scenarios characterized by the internationalization of productive processes and the labor market, labor flexibility, tax breaks, and benefit packages for entrepreneurs, which included the obstruction, control, or extermination of unions, feminizing the workplace and eliminating job security, prompting the emergence of new work-site related diseases and risks.





▲ Daniel Ruanova, *Identity, Temporary Guardian*, 2011 (acrylic on canvas).



▲ Hugo Crosthwaite, *Laocoon Drama*, 2010 (colored pencil and charcoal on canvas).



▲ Joel González Navarro, *Migrant*, 1988 (oil on canvas).

## THIS IS TIJUANA!

Twenty-first-century Tijuana has not managed to shake off its blackened legend fed by violence and drug trafficking. But it has been able to call national or international attention to its artists and cultural proposals. Together with the projects mentioned here, a large number of young people are recreating the arts and constructing new reference points and representations of the city. Projects like Bulbo, Radio Global, Yonke Art, among others, show new perspectives for the Tijuana world.

Tijuana culture is nourished by sampling. Tijuana codifies diverse cultural elements and sounds and recreates them, reutilizes them, recycles them, adapts them to new situations. Tijuana cultural sampling is made up of a broad symbolic and cultural repertoire that relates different cultural samples and experiences. In Tijuana, life is redefined intensely, and original or pre-codified cultural elements are changing samples that transform themselves in the city's web with no guarantee of fidelity. In Tijuana there is an intensive use of

cultural loops, like splintered elements or cultural sections that repeat themselves by enculturation or custom. The cultural loop produces processes that define familiar, recognizable, guiding coordinates.

Tijuana reinvents itself, renovates itself, based on the day-to-day, and by so doing, resorts to the palimpsest, to the pastiche, and cultural sampling as important resources for the (re)signification of art and social imaginaries, like inter-subjective frameworks where the meanings and significance of life and the day-to-day are defined, manifested in an infinity of artistic manifestations. **MM**

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> An extended version of this text has been published in "This is Tijuana: Pastiche, Palimpsests and Cultural Sampling", in *Strange New World. Art and Design from Tijuana* (San Diego, CA: Museum of Contemporary Art San Diego, 2006).