

Land, Fauna, and Allegories:  
Performance, Art, and Video in the Chihuahua Desert<sup>1</sup>

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As I stand in front of two images, the lithograph *Howl* (1977) by Luis Jiménez and the serigraph *A Nomad in Love* (2015) by Zeke Peña, displayed on the same sectioned-wall for the exhibit *Mexico, the Border and Beyond* at Mexic-Arte Museum in Austin, Texas,<sup>2</sup> and although there are two other images between them, my gaze shifts between them in an acknowledgement of their resonances. The most obvious one being, and the one that I want to propose as a sort of framework for this brief essay on visual art, performance, and video from and about the Chihuahua desert, is the word “howl” scripted in both images. The term resonance is one that is most always exclusively associated with sound, but here I am using it to describe a reverberation between two visual images with a shared word and its meaning, which, according to *Merriam-Webster’s Dictionary*, means first and foremost, and as an intransitive verb: “to emit a loud sustained doleful sound characteristic of members of the dog family.” Yet, there is another possibility for resonance here, and I want to suggest it as a framing device to this short essay. That is, these two images, individually, and together, create a mournful sound effect that we can hear through our eyes and can only understand as an embodied response, from both, each of the

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<sup>1</sup> This essay is a more academic and focused version of the talk that I delivered on March 27, 2021 as part of Mexic-Arte’s lecture series related to the exhibit *Mexico, The Border and Beyond*. The talk can be found here: <https://vimeo.com/531016977>.

<sup>2</sup> The space of the museum stands on Indigenous lands of Turtle Island, and am hereby acknowledging that my viewing and writing took place on stolen and occupied lands of various Indigenous groups that have been or have become part of the lands named Texas. My writing likewise acknowledges that my thinking of work that emerges from or engages terrain now known as the Chihuahua desert, is land that different Indigenous groups have been stewarding since before European conquest and colonization. The exhibit *Mexico, the Border and Beyond: Selections from the Juan Antonio Sandoval Jr. Collection* at Mexic-Arte Museum took place from December 19, 2020 to August 22, 2021. I visited the exhibit on February 4, 2021.

wolf or coyote figures that is within each of the images, and our own body. To put it simply, the reverberation also occurs between the images and the spectator, the wolf, in the case of Jiménez, and the coyote in Peña's image, are marking, sounding out a feeling, and ultimately sonically activating a space, creating a chamber, an acoustic space if you will, out of the museum.<sup>3</sup>

With the above I am suggesting that the text within Jiménez's and Peña's respective pieces and the sound that they (or suggest to) emit, which we read as coming from the body of each of the Chihuahua desert creatures within each of the frames, is a reverberation that I then use to think about contemporary visual art, sound art, performance, and video that is created in or about that particular location. In brief, the Jiménez's lithograph and Peña's serigraph (re-)activate for me some thoughts about border art that I want to briefly discuss here: the howling we sense and hear brings together the three principal structuring rubrics of the Mexic-Arte exhibit, land, fauna, and allegory, which sparks me to think about a few other artists that have done work that resonates or moves between these three organizing tenets. The artists who I will briefly discuss here, Rubén Ulises Rodríguez Montoya, José Villalobos, Xandra Ibarra, and Carmina Escobar, work in and between the mediums of performance, sculpture, visual art, installation, sound art, and video art and, following the ideas that I laid out about Jiménez's and Peña's respective pieces, are situated in the Chihuahua desert ecosystem and, equally important, are embodied howling (gestures) that speak or respond to some of the pressing issues that emerge from and exist from that specific location where Mexican State rubs against the U.S.: migration, militarization, policing/surveillance, gender identities and expectations, and industrial toxicity, among others. While this brief essay expands on my previous work that thinks about border art

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<sup>3</sup> As I am aware that some readers experienced the exhibit virtually, I am aware that your experience may not have been as I describe above. Yet, I would argue that there is a way in which resonance and reverberation can also occur virtually and, like wise, create echo chambers in whatever space we may be inhabiting when viewing virtually. Additionally, if you were to visit the exhibit in person with the app Augment El Paso you can activate Peña's image, both visually and sonically and will hear the coyote's howl.

and performance along the axis of immigration, labor, neoliberalism, belonging and non-belonging, I am less interested in repurposing the critical analytic of border, although that is where we can say that the work that I discuss here is geopolitically located, than in working with the concept of a desert ecosystem in a specific region that, while bounded or divided by nation-states, is also about the fauna—with its wailing sound full of grief—that somehow continues to exist in the region, or the moon moves, comes in and out of different phases, and shines on both sides of the border, despite it.<sup>4</sup>

### **Rubén Ulises Rodríguez Montoya's *Tochtli***

*Tochtli* (2020) hovers above, almost as a mimetic gesture to the waxing or waning phases of the moon. But, as opposed to the moon in Peña's serigraph where we see the rabbit clearly—or, in nahuatl, the *tochtli* that directly references the Mexica myth of the rabbit on the moon—in Rubén Ulises Rodríguez Montoya's *Tochtli* we are before a dark rendering that gently sways above all beings inhabiting the contested space of the Chihuahuan desert.<sup>5</sup> The full title, *Tochtli travels an omnibus at night down the Chihuahuan Desert to grandmothers house, to see Saint Seiya dubbed in Spanish*, activates the sculpture more so, moving it, ostensibly, across the border to grandmother's house on the Mexican side where Japanese anime is heard in dubbed Spanish. This sculpture, with textual matter that is replete with citations that reference various

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<sup>4</sup> I also acknowledge that, as much of the critical border art studies, I have also fixed my critical studies eye on the border that is always already referencing the San Diego and Tijuana region, which often leaves out the artistic production from other U.S.-Mexico border regions. Yet, in some ways, the critical essays that I have published inform my initial entry into thinking about art and performance from and/or about the Chihuahua desert. I invite the reader to peruse this previous published work: "Sneaking into the Media: Judi Werthein's *Brinco Shoes* and Post-Border Art, Illegal Immigration, Global Labor and Mass Media" in *Spectator* 29:1 (Spring, 2009); "Performing Borders: De Aquí y de Allá (Preliminary Notes on Mexican and Chicana/o Transnational Performance Art)" in the book *Global Mexican Cultural Productions*, edited by Rosana Blanco-Cano and Rita Urquijo Ruiz (Routledge, 2011); and "Staging Latinidad and Interrogating Neoliberalism in Contemporary Latina/o Performance and Border Art" in *The Cambridge History of Latina/o American Literature*, edited by John Morán González and Laura Lomas (Cambridge UP, 2018).

<sup>5</sup> Please visit Rodríguez Montoya's website for images of the sculpture and the full narrative-description: <https://rubenulisesrodriguezmontoya.com/Tochtli>.

myths that crisscross locations (Japanese, Greek, Mexica), is also richly textured because of the materiality of its construction, even as it's mostly a monochromatic tone, dominated by black and other darker hues. That is, the other aspect that we visually appreciate from a distance is a particularly long and hanging horn that most directly bestows this *tochtli* its monstrous hybrid and mythical qualities. From their artist statement, Rodríguez Montoya's practice revolves around the conjuring of *nahual* creatures with these dystopic characteristics that can be thought of as grotesque or abject and crafting them with material that seems disparate, as I mentioned above, but which is intentionally sourced from the established kin networks and from the landscapes that they inhabit.<sup>6</sup> The most prevalent of these being the Chihuahua desert, which in the artist's expansive mind contains the flora and the fauna and the geological formations, but also the manufactured cities, borders, dams, landfills that are crisscrossed by US state lines (New Mexico and Texas) and nation-states, the U.S. and Mexico. Thus, what has been discarded or merely exists as a remain of some animal's passing, is used to construct *Tochtli*, from the black sweatpants and t-shirts to the rabbit pelt, the latter of which becomes the ultimate reference for the *nahual* that has been converted here into a most abject animal, while the horn is a power source with which to protect itself in such a harsh environment.<sup>7</sup>

### **José Villalobos's *Joto Fronterizo***

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<sup>6</sup> Rodríguez Montoya's bio/artists statement opens in the following way: "Nahuales are mythological beings, witches/shamans that use ancient Aztec abilities of therianthropy to convert to animals. They exist and live alongside me and my family's cosmology. They've settled and share the same plane of existence of living in a small migrant community that's adjacent to the Rio Grande River and to the Camino Real Landfill. Nahuales too share my awe for the desert but have also inhaled the lethal landfill fumes that caused the premature death of my sister inside my mother's womb. What if the insidious fumes of landfill waste were to distort the genetic composition of Nahuales? Their shapeshifting from human to animal becomes arrested, leaving them at a liminal in-between space of human and animal. Because of this aberration, a new transfiguration occurs, born of abject queer fecundity. One in which internal organs become visible and curdled, giving these monsters a hypersensitivity to better feel their environment. Horns become claws, or antennae, or split tongues to pick up subtle movements in the air. Eventually, a new type of alchemy is made, evolved and better equipped to deal with hazardous environments." <https://rubenulisesrodriguezmontoya.com/bio-statement>

<sup>7</sup> To read the artist's narrative description of *Tochtli*: <https://rubenulisesrodriguezmontoya.com/Tochtli>

The mound of brown dirt at the center of the room, seen from a distance, is reminiscent of some make-shift burial ground. An installation as part of José Villalobos's *Joto Fronterizo* exhibit from 2019/2020 may very well have had that in mind. Yet, once we are closer and stand over it, we come to realize that there is a section that has been squared off to reveal a screen with moving visual images on the bottom section, and, along that, there is a strip of leather that lays horizontally across the top portion of the mound and beyond it, with text that reads: "Las manos de un hombre no deberían de ser tan suaves como esta piel" ("The hands of a man should not be as soft as this skin"). The "skin" that is alluded in the text has two referents here, one being the leather skin where the text is printed and the other being the skin of the palms of the hands that appear in the video that is being projected from the mound's squared section. I am drawn to this specific piece here, in the context of this essay's topic, because of the dirt that is used to build this mound, which suggests a burial ground. But the question arises, who or what is (being) buried? Or, given the fact that there is a moving image that emerges from the mound, is burial the correct word here? The printed text on the leather functions as a caption and, following Roland Barthes, anchors the meaning to here signify the softness of the hands on the screen that should not be as soft as they are because they are a man's hands.<sup>8</sup> The linguistic component that accompanies this installation, and the particular fact that it is in Spanish, further anchors this to a Mexican masculinity that is soft and thus coded as queer or, as the exhibit's title suggests, it is a *Joto Fronterizo* (or *Border Faggot*) and is very much self-referential. If we linger on the mound, we realize that the moving images emerging from the ground is a video performance entitled *Manos de hombre* ("Man's Hands") and, under 3 mins in length, we notice that it is Villalobos using a needle, read thread, and a pair of scissors, threading the word "hombre" ("man") on his

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<sup>8</sup> See the "Rhetoric of the Image" essay by Roland Barthes in his book, *Image-Music-Text* (1977).

two palms, HOM in one, and BRE in the other.<sup>9</sup> The self-branding, to ensure that those hands are not soft, but are marked as those of a man's, is a self-sacrificing gesture that speaks to the ways in which Mexican masculinity is a painful imposition on sexually dissident beings and bodies. Yet, we can also read against the grain once we bring into focus the fact that the process of embroidering is not associated with cis-het Mexican masculinity. Thus, in this particular installation, as in the other pieces that constitute the retrospective survey *Joto Fronterizo*, is insisting on the violent nature that is part of the social and cultural construction of Mexican masculinity, but in Villalobos' hands, the symbols are decontextualized in order to deconstruct it.

### **Xandra Ibarra's *La Corrida***

*La Corrida / The Run* from 2012 is a three channel 3 minute and 20 second video, projected on a loop, that features Xandra Ibarra running along different locations of the Chihuahua desert, specifically along the El Paso and Ciudad Juárez border region. A running Ibarra is dressed in a mixed version of a burlesque performer—as she's wearing nipple tassels—and a jock, on account of her running gear waist down. We see Ibarra running from different vantage points as the video has been edited to give us a mixture of perspectives: her full body from different sides; close-ups of her running legs; her front, midway torso up; and her back. All the while we hear a slow rendition of Pérez Prado's "El cumbanchero."<sup>10</sup> When we glimpse at Ibarra's face, we are confronted with a look of determination, a desire to get away from the heavily surveilled and militarized zone. Pérez Prado's happy-go-lucky melody used for is only made into an ironic commentary when we see realize that Ibarra is somehow running with determination at the same time that she cannot get away. Is she in fact trying to run away? Does

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<sup>9</sup> The reader can see this video performance using the following link: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UjnBD3qbQvY&t=60s>. Additionally, José Villalobos's website has photographs of the exhibit *Joto Fronterizo*, including the installation that I analyze here, as well as a digital catalogue that can be downloaded. <http://www.josevillalobosart.com>

<sup>10</sup> The reader can see this video using the following link: <https://vimeo.com/371471179>.

she have a destination? It is on a loop after all. This looping further effectuates a trapped sense when we account for one of the ways in which this three-channel video is exhibited (or has been in some occasions): with a treadmill in front of the projection to have the viewer run along with Ibarra—or in fact, the spectator participates as they activate the projected image by running—and feel the simultaneous sense of liberation and entrapment, as the viewer is running in place also feeling trapped in a loop.

*La Corrida* from 2012 was revised when the artist took segments from the previous version and remixed it to create a new version, now a single-channel piece in which the previously mentioned material is superimposed with “new” images the El Paso crossing point. That is, in *La Corrida* (2012, 2018) we see Ibarra running all the while this visual material crisscrosses with a business-as-usual behavior at the port of entry, including the presence of border patrol enforcement agents.<sup>11</sup> The 2 minute and 41 second video’s visuals are enhanced by the dance music remix that serves as the principal soundtrack, a borderized “Pump Up the Volume,” and, as viewers, we have achieved such a high boost of energy from the music, from the running, and from the running into mechanisms of surveillance, deterrence, and detention, that we are as equally determined as Ibarra.<sup>12</sup>

### **Carmina Escobar’s *Un lugar de paso***

*Variaciones de arena / Sand Variations* is the subtitle of the performative installation by Carmina Escobar that took place in 2013 at The Stanlee and Gerald Rubin Center for the Visual

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<sup>11</sup> The reader can see this video using the following link: <https://vimeo.com/281720626>. The reader may want to visit Xandra Ibarra’s website, the link to the page where the videos reside is: <https://www.xandraibarra.com/la-corrída/>.

<sup>12</sup> In her book *Dark Matter: On the Surveillance of Blackness* (2015), Simone Browne develops the concept of “dark sousveillance” “as a way to situate the tactics employed to render one’s self out of sight, and strategies used in the flight to freedom from slavery as necessarily ones of undersight” (21). While much more can be said about how I am influence by this work to think about the excessively surveilled zone of the U.S.-Mexico border region, given the limited space of this brief essay, I would like to briefly suggest that one could read Ibarra’s *La Corrida* project as directly challenging this state project.

Arts located on the campus of the University of Texas El Paso. *A Place of Passage*, as the English version of the piece is titled, directly signals the way that El Paso has long been imagined, a transitional location. Yet, what is striking for me is the subtitle as it signals the materiality of that site of passage—sand being the most direct referent to desert lands—but here layered with “variaciones” as a way to signal musical alterations, here being those that the sand contains or is capable of emitting. Music here is a concept understood liberally because in *Un lugar de paso* Escobar creates an immersive desert landscape that will result into a singular experience depending on how each of the visitors decides to engage with the space. Or it is perhaps better to say that the work of art comes into being when each person enters the space and activates it, thus they become Escobar’s co-creators. By bringing sand into an enclosed gallery space and using it to cover contact mikes that have been placed throughout, the audience moves through the space and over the sand, activating them and amplifies the sound caused by their feet, at the same time that these movements shape-shift the sand. That is one sand variation, other sounds meld though: the voice recordings of people recounting their desert-life or crossing experiences or the “music” emerging coming from the instruments used to blow into the sand. And yet another layer to *Un lugar de paso*, this one visual, is the projection of the sand-covered floor of the gallery and its transformations as people activate it, to the outside of the space.<sup>13</sup> The Rubin Center has been very intentional in its curation of art that explores the US-Mexico border for twenty years now, and *Un lugar de paso* is no exception.<sup>14</sup> Escobar’s performative installation at the Rubin Center is part of a larger trajectory of place-based art that, although

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<sup>13</sup> The performative installation was up for two days, October 12-13, 2013, but the reader can see a snippet of what took place via this video following the link: <https://vimeo.com/150993240>. The reader may also want to visit the artist’s website: <https://carminaescobar.monster>

<sup>14</sup> To understand the place of the Rubin Center in relationship to contemporary art produced about the border zone, I suggest beginning with Kate Bonansinga’s *Curating at the Edge: Artists Respond to the US/Mexico Border*, 2014.



abstracted as it mostly does away with trite tropes of *mexicanidad*, gestures towards the rupture of the gallery or museum space as being able to serve as microcosm for the life in the desert borderland space that is not only highly surveilled, but deeply violent to the most vulnerable, migrants, women, queers, and, of course, all forms of animal and plant life.

## **Conclusion**

As the reader might have picked up by now, in this rather brief essay on performance, visual art, sound art, and video art, I have simply sampled a few artistic interventions by a small selection of artists that directly refer to experiences of the Chihuahua desert and/or the US-Mexico borderlands. Inspired by the sonic and visual reverberations in Luis Jiménez's *Howl* and Zeke Peña's *A Nomad in Love*, I wanted to bring into that conversation some of the work that directly engages the themes of land, fauna and allegory. The sonic chamber of assorted howls that Escobar creates in *Un lugar de paso* contains the land that Ibarra crisscrosses with determination, that Villalobos uses to bury an antiquated notion of Mexican masculinity, and where we might see Rodríguez Montoya's futuristic dystopic nahual transit (at night). *Un lugar de paso* serves here as an allegory for all that moves in and out: sound, bodies, images, either highly visible as it is inevitable that the regimes of looking and (State) surveillance hold them captive, or under the radar, in the dark night as *tochtli* on their way to grandma's house, even if the UV light may shine on them, they are our guide into what will be our near future.