Visitor’s Guide

Resistance as Power:
A Curatorial Response to Under the Feet of Jesus

September 7, 2019 - February 23, 2020

All quotes by Helena María Viramontes from her novel Under the Feet of Jesus
RESISTANCE AS POWER:
A Curatorial Response to Under the Feet of Jesus

**Common Reading** at UO is a year of conversation around a shared book. This academic year, all first-year students will receive *Under the Feet of Jesus*, a 1995 novel by Helena María Viramontes. Faculty will use this story about the vivid world and difficult lives of migrant farmworkers in California to teach a variety of topics ranging from farm labor policies and access to quality health care and material resources, to food justice and environmental racism. The title of the book refers to the act of placing important documents, including birth certificates, beneath a portable religious statue each time the protagonist’s family arrives at a new migrant work camp. More information about the Common Reading, including upcoming university events, is available at commonreading.uoregon.edu.

To complement the Common Reading, the Jordan Schnitzer Museum of Art (JSMA) presents its fourth annual **Common Seeing**, an exhibition that expands upon these themes and supports cross-cultural understanding. Five artists in the exhibition grew up in migrant worker families in California and the Midwest. JSMA curators Cheryl Hartup and Danielle Knapp developed the checklist in response to conversations with faculty members from the Latinx Scholars Academic Residential Community Stakeholders Group; Julie Voelker-Morris, Faculty Fellow, Common Reading Program; and other members of the university community.

Two special loans from the Smithsonian American Art Museum (SAAM) by artists Emanuel Martinez and Domingo Ulloa provide historical and cultural touchstones for the book and for contemporary works from the JSMA’s permanent collection. On exhibit for the first time are recent acquisitions of works by Victor Maldonado and Lilián Nieves. Also on view are two etchings by Ashland-based artist Betty LaDuke and a special loan by the late sculptor and painter Rubén Trejo. Ester Hernández’s iconic *Sun Mad* starkly contrasts the familiar scene of a smiling young woman on raisin boxes, an image Viramontes’ protagonist reflects upon while harvesting grapes under a mighty white sun.

**Resistance as Power: A Curatorial Response to *Under the Feet of Jesus*** is one in a series of American art exhibitions created through a multi-year, multi-institutional partnership formed by the Smithsonian American Art Museum as part of the Art Bridges + Terra Foundation Initiative.
“Under the roof of the bungalow, Petra thought of the lima bean in her, the bean floating in the night of her belly, bursting a root with each breath. Would the child be born without a mouth, would the poisons of the fields harden in its tiny little veins?” p. 125

For over six decades, Betty LaDuke’s art has addressed social justice, sustainability and shared humanity. She has travelled extensively in Mexico, Central and South America, Asia and Africa, sketching the lives and struggles of people and recording oral histories that inform her prints, paintings, and sculptures. LaDuke states, “I’m a social activist in that my work is for educational purposes—it’s displayed in museums and nonprofits and universities. Art is meant to be enjoyed aesthetically, but it should also bring forth questions.” (Willamette, the magazine of Willamette University, Fall 2017, p. 23)

What do the birds and feathered beings in Latin America, Seeds of Unrest communicate to you? How would you describe the expressions on their faces? How does the artist’s colored-etching depict unrest? Point to other seeds of unrest in the exhibition and share what you think they will become in the future. What seeds of unrest do you see and feel around you?
“If we don’t take care of each other, who would take care of us? Petra asked. We have to look out for our own.” p.96.

“Petra took care of Alejo, not because of who he was, but because she was a mother too, and if Estrella was sick, or Ricky and Arnulfo were sick in the piscas, she would want someone to take care of them. And of course, she did it for the love of God.” p.124.

Folk art frequently influences the style and imagery of Betty LaDuke’s work. This print is part of the artist’s “Tree of Life” series. Mexican Tree of Life sculptures, first made in the 1920s in Izucar de Matamoros, Pueblo, Mexico, traditionally depict the biblical Tree of Life in the Garden of Eden, Adam and Eve, the Serpent, and the Archangel Gabriel at their base. What does LaDuke’s Tree of Life #21, Mother Courage, Nunca Más have in common with a traditional Mexican Tree of Life clay sculpture, like the one pictured here? Describe the expressions on the faces in LaDuke’s Tree of Life print. How do they compare to the facial expressions in Latin America, Seeds of Unrest exhibited beside it? Why does the artist reference birds in both works? How does LaDuke communicate courage in this print and why do you think she included the phrase “nunca más” or “never again” in the title?
“He wheezed and almost fell, and if it wasn’t for the fact that he was determined not to fall, he would have tumbled like the ripe peaches hitting the ground with a hard thud. His body swung forward and he caught himself by hitching on to a branch and he scratched his face against a mesh of leaves. As the rotary motor of the biplane approached again, he closed his eyes and imagined sinking into the tar pits.” pp.77-78.

Victor Maldonado (American, b. 1976)

**The Fallen**, 2018
Acrylic on canvas

This work was acquired with the assistance of The Ford Family Foundation through a special grant program managed by the Oregon Arts Commission; 2019:22.1

Describe a time when you simultaneously felt visible and invisible, heroic and knocked off your feet. In *The Fallen*, Maldonado presents each *lucha libre* figure differently through line, shape, color, scale, and perspective. What does each representation communicate to you? How does the artist’s use of color shape your interpretation of *The Fallen*?
From 2013 to 2015, Victor Maldonado (they, them, theirs) donned the masks of the most famous Mexican lucha libre wrestlers—El Santo (1917-84) and El Demonio Azul (1922-2000)—and they became Macho Libre or Mad Mex, two alter egos spending time at home and out and about in Portland, Oregon, as well as at the state’s coast and mountains. Maldonado had recently become a U.S. citizen, after living in the United States for thirty-eight years. This experience caused them to confront and embrace latent fears and to contemplate the meaning of freedom. The Fallen is perhaps the culmination of their investigation of the subject of masked lucha libre wrestlers.

“Estrella’s eyes sting like an onion, and the baskets of grapes resisted her muscles, pulling their magnetic weight back to the earth. The woman with the red bonnet did not know this. Her knees did not sink in the hot white soil, and she did not know how to pour the baskets of grapes inside the frame gently and spread the bunches evenly on top of the newsprint paper. She did not remove the frame, straighten her creaking knees, the bend of her back, set down another sheet of newsprint paper, reset the frame, then return to the pisca again with the empty basket, row after row, sun after sun. The woman’s bonnet would be as useless as Estrella’s own straw hat under a white sun so mighty, it toasted the green grapes to black raisins.” p. 50.
Thirty-one years after Sun Mad, Hernández made Sun Raid in 2012. Does Sun Raid have the same impact on you as Sun Mad? Explain your answer. Look for other representations of the sun, the female body, and grapes in this exhibition. How do the symbolic values of these subjects change from one work to the next?
“Is that what happens? Estrella thought, people just use you until you’re all used up, then rip you into pieces when they’re finished using you?” p. 75.
Shortly after the United States entered World War II, the country needed a source of inexpensive labor for the agricultural industry and railway maintenance. In 1942, the U.S. and Mexico signed the Mexican Farm Labor Agreement, which guaranteed a minimum wage of 30 cents per hour and “humane treatment” for workers. From 1942 to 1964, 4.6 million Mexican nationals came to work in the U.S. as *braceros* or field hands.

Domingo Ulloa painted *Braceros* in 1960, the same year Juan Loza (b. 1939, Guanajuato, México) joined the *bracero* program and travelled from Mexico to the United States. Loza worked in Arkansas, California, Michigan, and Texas, picking beets, celery, corn, cucumbers, onions, peanuts, peppers, rice, soybeans, and tomatoes. Below is an English translation of Loza’s firsthand account of what it was like living in the type of housing Ulloa painted in the far back of *Braceros*. For Juan Loza’s complete oral history as told in Spanish to his niece Mireya Loza in 2005, go to: [http://braceroarchive.org/items/show/175?view=full](http://braceroarchive.org/items/show/175?view=full)

JL: Well, in Arkansas I—we lived in a very rotten small house . . . very small. There were rats below because they used half the house to put seeds to sow the next year or to put fertilizers or to put tractor fuel [or] threshing machines and things like that. The boss saw it as nothing [not a big deal]. I came to see that even their dog during that time had a new house and I saw [that the dog got] about three [more] new houses during the time that I was there; and during the time it was cold, it lived in their [the boss’s] own house. But on the other hand, we, well, didn’t have that opportunity. We didn’t have that ability. We had to cover ourselves. I remember it as if it was now. They gave us some blankets that the Army [said in English] uses—green ones—and when some braceros started to leave because their work had ended, some left the blankets, and I picked them up. We needed them to cover us.

Domingo Ulloa’s deep respect for the figure, and political and moralistic subjects were inspired by the Mexican muralists and Mexican print collectives; Rico Lebrun, his art professor in California, who encouraged him to create work in service to humanity; and his membership in a painters’ labor union. Compare the faces in Ulloa’s painting *Braceros* to the faces in Betty LaDuke’s prints *Latin America, Seeds of Unrest* and *Tree of Life #21, Mother Courage, Nunca Más*. What is the mood of Ulloa’s painting? How does it compare to the mood of *The Fallen*? How does Ulloa’s repetition of form and depiction of space impact your experience of the work?
“It was always a question of work, and work depended on the harvest, the car running, their health, the conditions of the road, how long the money held out, and the weather, which meant they could depend on nothing.” p. 4.

Rubén Trejo (American, 1937-2009)

*Roots*, 1982

Steel, wood, metal, glass, wood shavings

Collection of Tanya Trejo and Keane Watterson
Rubén Trejo was “[a] Minnesota-born mestizo of mixed Tarascan Indian and Hispanic heritage who lived and worked outside the geographic centers of art and culture, [and] he was thoroughly and comprehensively an American artist.” (Ruben Trejo: Beyond Boundaries, Aztlán y más allá, edited by Ben Mitchell with Tomas Ybarra-Frausto and John Keeble, University of Washington Press, 2010. p. 4.). He spent about half his life in St. Paul, Minnesota, and the other half in Cheney, Washington, pursuing a lifelong engagement with Spanish, Mexican, Chicanx, ancient indigenous, and English literature, poetry, mythology, philosophy, and theology.

Trejo used color sparingly on nearly every element of the sculpture. How does the artist’s minimal applications of yellow, red, green, and grey paint enhance your interpretation of the work? How does Trejo’s use of materials and design influence your response to the work? What are your “roots”? Who gets to decide, label, categorize and define what “roots” are? How are “roots” an imposition, an expectation, a fortification?
Write your definition of an altar ______________________________________________________________

How does this altar compare to altars you have seen, or your idea of an altar? The artist made this work when he was nineteen years old, and it was used for a sacred event involving one of the most important labor leaders and civil rights activist at the time—César Chávez. Chávez broke a twenty-five-day water only fast by receiving the Eucharist (bread and wine), served by a priest from this altar, during a Catholic Mass. Martínez’s altar activates a variety of signs and symbols. Next to each visual element, write what it symbolizes to you.

The color pink ______________________________________________________________

Maize ______________________________________________________________

Wheat ______________________________________________________________

Grapes ______________________________________________________________

Cross ______________________________________________________________

Stylized black eagle in red circle ______________________________________________________________

Fist ______________________________________________________________

Stepped fret design ______________________________________________________________

Tripartite face ______________________________________________________________

What else would you like to add? ______________________________________________________________
Think of a social justice leader you admire. What would you make or do to honor that person's cause?
“Tools to build, bury, tear down, rearrange and repair, a box of reasons his hands took pride in. She lifted the pry bar in her hand, felt the coolness of iron and power of function, weighed the significance it awarded her, and soon she came to understand how essential it was to know these things.” p. 26.
Lilliam Nieves (far right) and UO students in Mariko Plescia’s SPAN 348 U.S. Latino Literature and Culture class with *Beauty Queen IV* in process. Nieves also met with Kelley León Howarth’s SPAN 301 Identidades Hispánsas class in July 2019.

*Beauty Queen IV (taladro)* [drill] is a self-portrait of the artist holding a tool, which she uses to make her art. If you were making a self-portrait, what would you hold in your hands? What would you wear? What part of the globe would your feet be touching? In each self-portrait from her *Beauty Queen* series, the artist includes a cursor icon in a different place. Why do you think she does that, and what would your cursor icon point at? How is Nieves’ image similar to your concept of a beauty queen? How does it differ? There are several representations of women in this exhibition. How do they each exude resistance and power?
Day of the Dead: Hanging Altars of Coatepec and Other Expressions from Morelos
Presentation in Spanish by Mexican photographer Fernando Soto with English translation
Wednesday, October 30, 5:30 p.m.
Generous support for this project provided by Art Bridges.

Celebración del Día de los Muertos / Day of the Dead Celebration
Friday, November 1 and Saturday, November 2
6:00-9:00 p.m.

This event is co-sponsored by Oak Hill School in conjunction with the Jordan Schnitzer Museum of Art, MEChA of UO, Adelante Sí, University of Oregon Office of Equity and Inclusion, Instituto Estatal de la Cultura de Guanajuato and Instituto Estatal de Atención al Migrante Guanajuatense and its families.

Family Day
December 7
12:00-3:00 p.m.