This essay was written for Consuelo Jimenez Underwood’s solo exhibition *Welcome to Flower-Landia* at the Triton Museum of Art in the fall of 2013. The exhibition was a culmination of a four-year collaboration with the artist to present a new body of work. Over the four years, we met monthly to discuss the work in progress and explore themes for the exhibition. I recently connected with Consuelo to discuss the exhibition and reflect on our time together. She mentioned that time was a moment of great transition for her personally and professionally. She expressed that the exhibition gave her “permission” to do what she wanted, to work independently of the institution where she spent many years teaching. It was a “busting through the borderline” that has since given her a new sense of freedom to create. The exhibition told that story. It exists as a personal narrative reflecting on her life from childhood, along the border, to adulthood, within academia. The work exhibited represents the trajectory of her artistic practice through these momentous events in her life and her intimate relationship with *hilo*.

Consuelo Jimenez Underwood: *Welcome to Flower-Landia*

Triton Museum of Art, Fall 2013

María Esther Fernández

Consuelo Jimenez Underwood is neither from Mexico nor the United States. She is of the borderlands. Her earliest memories are of crossing back and forth through the border city of Calexico in California from Mexicali, Mexico to work in the fields of Vacaville and Sacramento.¹ Experiencing the border as a child was both fantastic and horrifying. It was the backdrop for her childhood, enigmatic and ever present. As a child, Jimenez Underwood learned

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¹ Biographical and other information on art works comes from a series of interviews I conducted with the artist over a period of four years from 2009-2013.
that the border was a force to be reckoned with. The fear that she experienced viscerally at a young age stirred in her a fight for survival, to preserve her spirit. Her Huichol heritage gave her the strength and purpose to infiltrate, play the game and survive. Trained as a child to cross borders both real and psychological, Jimenez Underwood walks between opposing issues. Living in the middle as an infiltrator, she has learned to navigate contested territories: as a field worker in the fields, as a student in school, and as an artist using Indigenous weaving traditions as fine art. Weaving became her deliberate language rooted in the aesthetic and political conditions along the border. This exhibition is an attempt to recreate that journey, to relieve the tension of a highly volatile border region as embodied by a young girl, and to re-imagine it as a place where the spirit can roam free. This exhibition is conceived in two parts, early mixed media wall hangings and recent woven tapestries, rebozos and installations depicting varying aspects of Jimenez Underwood’s journey, paralleling her fear, joy, survival and transcendence.

Border-Landia

As a child, Jimenez Underwood struggled to understand the grown-up interplay at the border where many undocumented transactions occur and where people are disposable and culture is commodified. She began questioning the persecution along the border and the ramifications for her family. Her father was a Mexican national without papers. Even her own citizenship provided no solace as a child crossing with her undocumented father. Rather than retreat, Jimenez Underwood was unwilling to lose her soul so she looked inward to preserve her spirit. A child’s spirit, not yet consumed by trauma, inhabits a place of joy. This coupled with the Indigenous belief that the spirit resides in the land, is how she harnessed her strength to survive. This was the key to Jimenez Underwood’s survival; an understanding that the ills of the border
are engendered by adults lacking a worldview that acknowledges the spirit. Joy continues to inform her artistic practice. Her early body of work incorporates minimal weaving which reflects the artist’s lived experience as a young scholar with little time to devote to her weaving practice. This work differs aesthetically from the more recent works in the exhibition created after she retired from San José State University. Mixed media pieces that incorporate found materials such as plastic, wire, and safety pins, pervade her earlier pieces. In these works, Underwood’s focus is on material as opposed to the weaving process.

Jimenez Underwood refers to these found materials as mundane elements in that they represent the gritty tension of the lived condition along the border. In many of her works, these elements do not lose their original form. In contrast, Jimenez Underwood refers to spirit work as the transformation of an object in the creation of a new one through weaving. Natural fiber and material such as leather, cotton, silk, etc., are transformed into cohesive woven pieces that transcend the individual elements that form them. There is minimal woven fiber present in her earlier works as a nod to the spirit. Jimenez Underwood’s artistic practice is informed by the Toltec understanding of consciousness, the tonal and nahual. The tonal is an awakened state that is associated with the structure of the physical world which the artist equates to the mundane. In contrast, the nahual incorporates all things of the spirit world. Jimenez Underwood reinterprets this philosophical approach within her artistic practice. She conceives of her earlier work as the tonal which employ mundane elements from the earthly and human world along the border.

Jimenez Underwood’s concept of Border-Landia exists between the disparate views of the border as a seedy underbelly of crime and violence, a hedonistic playground for tourists to prey on culture in an exploitative economic exchange, and Jimenez Underwood’s internal view

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2 The reference to Toltec understanding of consciousness is informed by the artist’s interpretation and application in her practice.
of the border as a place of intrigue, excitement, joy and survival. *Border-Landia* is fraught with tension as it inhabits a place of fear within her, but in doing so elicits her survival instinct to preserve the spirit through joy and celebration. The wall installation, *Welcome to Border-Landia!* (2013), is a glimpse into her reimagining of the border as a bright, shiny, colorful space as reflected in the placement of large bright green *nopales*, cactus, constructed of wire on the wall (Figure 62). Silver and gold painted nails are placed at ten points along the border where the wall is being constructed representing the *peso*, Mexican currency, and the American dollar. In Mexican Spanish vernacular, the peso is commonly referred to as *plata*, silver, and the American dollar as *oro*, gold. The border towns are labeled with images of Mexican products that can be purchased on either side of the border, commenting on the contradiction between allowing the free exchange of commerce to satiate the American thirst for Mexican food and labor, and the construction of an imposing border wall intended to keep its people out. The border is conveniently porous and insurmountable.

Not only does Jimenez Underwood expose the hypocrisy in the United State government’s “protect our borders” hyperbole, she also takes direct aim at the hypocrisy in Mexican nationalism. Indigenous peoples of Mexico are equally exploited on either side of the border, although aspects of their culture are prominent in national Mexican folklore. Jimenez Underwood is equally scathing in her critique of border trans-nationalism; flags from both countries are featured and re-imagined in her work. It is not surprising that these flags are among the first symbols Jimenez Underwood manipulated early in her artistic career. In her first weaving, *C.C. Huelga* (1974), Underwood masterfully marries aesthetics and content (Figure 1). We see the deliberate use of weaving as the method of communication, using Indigenous angular designs as language, with the message inspired by the farm worker politic as evidenced by the
thunderbird at the top and bottom of the weaving. Although not in the exhibition, this is a pivotal and prophetic piece in her trajectory, as it is a precursor of work to come. In subsequent iterations of her flags, we see a shift to mixed media with the introduction of plastic and wire. The careful choice of material not only creates interestingly beautiful weavings, but forces viewers to reflect on the pervasive consumerism prevalent in American culture. Jimenez Underwood has used food wrappers, plastic bags, newspaper delivery bags, copper wire and other found objects in creating the flags, as seen in an earlier piece, Consumer Flag (2010) (Figure 45).

The newer flags in this exhibition are a return to traditional weaving as with C.C. Huelga, although still mixed media with the predominant use of silk, cotton threads and leather. Noticeably absent are the mundane found objects of her earlier pieces. Jimenez Underwood uses flags from both the United States and Mexico and makes them one in a visual reference to their interchangeability in the subjugation of native peoples. Either brand of nationalism is detrimental to native peoples and to the land. In One Nation Underground (2013), the flags are sewn together, one over the other, to create a singular flag, with barbed wire constructed from leather depicting the physical border (Figure 57). The Mexican flag’s central emblem of the eagle with a serpent in its talons perched on a nopal, a cactus, is visible in the center of the flag. In lieu of the U.S. stars, the California Poppy; Texas Blue Bonnet, Arizona Yucca, and New Mexico Saguaro, all border flowers, appear ghost-like on the flag, highlighting their endangered status.

In Home of the Brave (2013), Underwood again marries both flags, but some of the traditional elements of the United States and Mexican flags are missing (Figure 55). This piece pays homage to the survival of the Indigenous border crosser. At the center of the flag is a hoop in lieu of any national emblem or coat of arms. The hoop is an abstraction of the Mexican
emblem of the eagle and the serpent. The eagle and serpent perched atop a *nopal* ultimately represent the land and are intentionally stylized to look like a hoop, emblematic of the strength and survival of Indigenous peoples. In addition, the flag is layered over colorful Indigenous textile. Silk flowers are sewn throughout the flag. They differ from the ghostly flowers sewn in *One Nation Underground*; they appear alive in full earthly form and suggest the quiet beauty and resiliency of Indigenous communities present at the border. Barbed wire reworked as the borderline is sewn across the flag with the ten points at which the border wall is being constructed defined by safety pins, glass beads and fabric printed with the caution sign. These materials allude to all things earthly and human regarding the border: immigration and consumerism. This imagery is repeated in Jimenez Underwood’s work when depicting the physical border.

The iconic and controversial caution sign, erected along the border along Interstate 5 near San Ysidro beginning in 1990, features the silhouettes of an immigrant family running. Designed by graphic artist, John Hood, this image is featured prominently in Jimenez Underwood’s work not only in acknowledgement of the perilous conditions along the border for immigrant families, but also as a personal statement for the artist who identifies with the young girl depicted. The titles of the pieces *C. Jane Run* (2005) and *Run, Jane Run!* (2004) intentionally reference the popular Dick and Jane reading series from the 1930s to the 1970s underscoring the grittiness at the border as witnessed through the lens of a child (Figures 28 and 27). In these pieces, Jimenez Underwood again makes deliberate aesthetic choices in using fiber, plastic, safety pins and glass beads to represent the real and mundane human elements of the physical border.

Jimenez Underwood plays with scale in all her work using miniatures to engage the viewer on a more personal level, while allowing larger pieces and installations to be more
confrontational and overwhelming. The miniatures *Double the Fun* (2013) have a colorful border that represents Underwood’s assertion that, through her Indigenous identity her spirit remains intact (Figure 52). The stars in the canton, or upper left corner of the U.S. flag, representing the states are missing. Instead she plays with the traditional colors of the American flag and imbibes the canton with black, red, yellow, white, and green, the five sacred colors in Native American tradition, in a direct challenge to the nation state and its borders. These pieces transition seamlessly into the next body of work. Although, they are still flags, they are devoid of national emblems and mixed media referencing the physical border. They are an aesthetic return to more traditional weaving, signaling Underwood’s transcendence from highlighting the ills of the border to directly engaging the spirit.

Just as Underwood has manipulated the flag to critique the United States and Mexican governments and their policies, similarly she has used the *rebozo*, or shawl, to address the human condition of crossing the border. Historically, the first iterations of the *rebozo* are depicted in pre-Columbian codices used by Indigenous peoples to carry bundles. The Spanish reintroduced the decoratively woven *rebozo* used by women at church. The word *Rebozo* derives from the Spanish word, *rebozar*, which means to cover up. It has become a national Mexican symbol and expression of history, art and culture. Indigenous women use the *rebozo* to hold their children and/or around their waists to support their backs while engaging in physical labor in the fields. In the United States, the *rebozo* and other native dress such as the *huipil*, have been worn by women as a political act of cultural resistance and affirmation.

Early in her career, Jimenez Underwood set a goal to weave a *rebozo* for the Virgen de Guadalupe. While she was in school or working in the art department at San José State University, she found limited time to weave. However, her desire to weave this *rebozo* never
subsided, so she would appease it by creating “quicker pieces” such as the *Mendocino Rebozo* (2004), using safety pins to “sew” fabric pieces with the caution symbol printed on them (Figure 26). Unlike the decorative handwoven patterns predominantly featured on traditional woven *rebozos*, the silhouette of the immigrant family running is used as the decorative element. Its repetitive use in silver and gold creates a ghostly effect. This *rebozo* is for all women crossing the border who cannot weave anymore. They perilously cross the border to work, camouflaged and invisible to society, keeping our surroundings orderly and clean. The *Mendocino Rebozo* is constructed so that half is in silver and the other half is in gold, referencing the currency of both Mexico and the United States, which alludes to the exchange of people and currency as well as the disparity in what labor we value. The fabric pieces with the caution symbol are intentionally placed in opposite directions on either side of the *rebozo* to further outline the shift from Mexico to the United States.

Flower-Landia

Crossing the border suggests leaving one place for another. While there is much conflict and turmoil in the border region, the spirit of the people and the land are still present and enduring. This is perhaps the most important message of Jimenez Underwood’s work. This consciousness reconstructs the border as a place of survival and transcendence where the spirit fully inhabits the land. *Flower-Landia* existed in Jimenez Underwood’s mind as a child; a way to survive the day to day. Now, as an adult, she brings this vision to life creating transcendent pieces situating her practice within the realm of spirit work. In this body of work, we see the deliberate use of thread; there is less use of mixed media and a more focused return to weaving of natural fibers and material. Jimenez Underwood moves from creating overt political pieces
that play with imagery referencing United States and Mexican border politics to weaving more spiritual pieces that are no less political, but align with her understanding of the land. In these works, we see a connection to the ethereal through the use of materials and thematic content rooted in Indigenous practice with a global perspective. Jimenez Underwood asserts that hilo, thread, is the authentic voice of the Indigenous woman. So this is how she speaks. She defines joy as “playing with threads in the weavings whose value is only in how you look at the world. There is no economy dictating the value and setting the rules of the exchange, it is pure (Jimenez Underwood, 2013).” These works reflect this time in Jimenez Underwood’s career which she defines as a moment of clarity, or nahual, allowing for more spiritual reflection within her artistic practice.

Flowers began to take a more prominent visual presence in Jimenez Underwood’s work after the birth of her granddaughter, Xochil, in 1994. Xochitl is the Nahual word for flower. The flowers occupy that space in contention between what is earthly and spiritual. *Whether dead or alive in their earthly form, the spirit is always with the flowers.* At times, they appear to abandon their earthly forms and inhabit the spirit world. The wall installation, *Flowers, Borders and Threads, Oh My!* (2013) is the crossing over into the spirit world (Figure 53). The installation features the world map in the background referencing border struggles all around the world. The painted borderline in brown hues depicts the US/Mexico border contextualizing this piece intentionally in Jimenez Underwood’s homeland. She refers to the border as an herida, or wound in many of her previous works, yet here it is scabbed over. Her engagement with the border in this installation shifts to consider a global political and environmental perspective. The flowers found along the U.S. Mexico border are seen here in white and are placed across the entire global map representing the earthly being in spirit form in a direct reference to the detrimental impact of
the construction of physical borders on the environment. The veil of glitter sparkles to reflect the shine of an apparition. The spirit is still alive in the land.

The most personal piece is, *Tenured Petals* (2013), a self-portrait, featuring 10 petals placed on a plinth (Figure 61). Ten is a magical number for Jimenez Underwood. When she turned 10, she felt a sense of accomplishment at reaching a decade and used this mark of time as a framework for planning her life and subsequently developing a system of measurement in her weaving practice. This piece also references her struggle in her academic career, having achieved tenure at San José State University while retaining her identity as a weaver after facing intense pressure to succumb to a more traditional fine art practice. The petals are placed below the wall installation, *Flowers, Borders and Threads, Oh My!* as if having fallen from the flowers prior to their crossing over into the spirit world. The petals were hand dyed using a natural dye made with yellow onion skins to differentiate them from the white ethereal flowers of the wall installation underscoring their earthly form.³

The tapestries, *Four Xewam* (2013) and the series *Sun Set/Rise CA # 1-4* (2011), embody the joy at the core of Jimenez Underwood’s artistic practice and were created solely on the loom (Figures 54 and 50). These brightly colored floral pieces are playful, yet have visible references to the border, with the borderline running through them. The barbed wire representing the border in these pieces is constructed using leather. Rather than sewing the barbed wire on top of the weavings, as in her flag series, Underwood weaves the barbed wire into the tapestry as if it has been consumed by the spirit. The deliberately colorful bordered edge on some of the tapestries are references to childhood bringing joy to the individual pieces for the artist. In these works, Jimenez Underwood again exclusively uses natural fibers and material in her weaving in an attempt to inhabit the realm of the spirit. There is less use of metal and plastic, what Jimenez

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³ Jimenez Underwood created the dye by boiling yellow onion skins and salt for 12 hours.
Underwood refers to as the earthly, human and mundane elements. Woven fabrics, leather and thread pervade the work.

Jimenez Underwood’s *Rebozos for Our Mothers* series (2010-2013) features five rebozos of varying sizes (Figure 58). Each is woven for one of the spiritual mothers: Mundane Mother (Malintzin/Malinche), Virgen de Guadalupe (Tonantzin), Earth Mother, Moon Mother, and Water Mother & Rain/Serpent Mother which are two *rebozos* paying homage to water. In weaving *rebozos*, Jimenez Underwood anchors the spiritual mothers to everyday women. Having transcended the mundane aspects of earthly life and therefore clothing of any form, in assigning them each a *rebozo*, the mothers become of this earth. The vertical orientation of the work is not a misinterpretation or misuse of the *rebozo*, it is a reorientation to tell a story of rebirth within the divine. The shift from mixed media to thread is further evidenced in this series. All the *rebozos* in this series share similar characteristics. For example, most contain both woven and found fabric to varying degrees. In addition, each *rebozo* uses fine metal wire in the warp, or vertical threads, to create a strong structural base. Jimenez Underwood selected threads in vibrant colors with flecks of silver and/or gold to suggest the ethereal. Each piece has related imagery such as flowers, and crescent and full moons stitched throughout. Jimenez Underwood’s *rebozos* not only reflect an aesthetic shift in the use of media, they signal her transcendence to a spiritual plane. The first *rebozo* woven in this series, *Mother Mundane* (2010), is made up of mostly wire giving the form a rigidity and strength symbolic of our carnal mother, Doña Marina/Malinche/Malintzin (Figure 46). Malintzin is a controversial historical figure from the

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4 Since the initial presentation of five rebozos in her solo exhibition, *Welcome to Flower-Landia*, at the Triton Museum of Art, Underwood exclusively calls this work *Rebozos for Our Mothers*. Since the exhibition, the series now includes a sixth rebozo, which I will also discuss (to respect the integrity and spirit in which this series has evolved).

5 Also known as Malinali Tenépal and Doña Marina. Malintzin spoke many languages and gave birth to a son and daughter with Hernan Cortés.
time of the Spanish invasion and is often portrayed in myths as a traitor to her race for having served as an interpreter to Hernan Cortés. However, Chicana scholarship has contributed to a feminist recasting of Malintzin as a slave that rose to political prominence.\(^6\) Whatever the interpretation, she is considered the mythical mother of the mestiza. Jimenez Underwood explains that she felt a pull to weave this *rebozo* before moving on to the other mothers. This tension to complete the *Rebozo for Mother Mundane* is reminiscent of the Toltec philosophy requiring a wrestling with the mundane, or tonal, to achieve nahual, or spiritual transcendence.

Jimenez Underwood made deliberate aesthetic choices early in her career driven by a political critique that had traces and hints of the spirit. Her perspective, rooted in her Indigenous traditions, has been that of a survivor, however, her motivation has been to expose the ills along the border and their effects on the spirit. The overtly political mixed media pieces set a foundation upon which Jimenez Underwood attempts to correct historical inaccuracies, shed light on current inequities, and heal the spirit. This exhibition maps a trajectory of Jimenez Underwood’s life’s work, both personal and political.\(^7\) In childhood joy was survival; in adulthood, it is the path forward. Jimenez Underwood explains that this work is a movement forward, a completion of a message which is a higher calling transcending the horror she experienced as a child and fully residing in a place of joy.

\(^6\) See Norma Alarcon, “Traduttora, Traditora: A Paradigmatic Figure of Chicana Feminism” (1989), Cherrie Moraga *Loving in the War Years* (1983), Adelaida del Castillo “Malintzin Tenepal: A Preliminary Look into a New Perspective” (1977).

\(^7\) Since this exhibition in 2013, Jimenez Underwood has woven 6 additional *rebozos* and many other works that have resulted in both national and international exhibitions.