

# LOS MOJADOS

Migrant Bodies and Latinx Identities



## SUN MAD RAISINS

UNNATURALLY GROWN WITH

INSECTICIDES - MITICIDES - HERBICIDES - FUNGICIDES

A **SPACE** for **DIALOGUE** 93

HOOD MUSEUM OF ART, DARTMOUTH



*Los mojudos*, usually translated as “wetbacks,” has come to derogatorily describe undocumented Mexican migrants who enter the United States through the Rio Grande, the river separating the two nations. In the 1950s, it was so commonly used that there was even a law called Operation Wetback (1954), which prompted the biggest mass deportation of Mexican immigrants in US history. The term reinforces the othering of migrant communities in the United States and is applied to those coming from beyond just Mexico, affecting the way that Latin American immigrants come to understand their bodies and identities in this country. Thus, the reclamation of this slur in this exhibition is meant to give power to the immigrant narratives that are often pushed to the margins of society. The artists in *Los Mojados: Migrant Bodies and Latinx Identities* grapple with the representation of the Latinx population, typically seen as cast off and wretched, in a time of growing nativism. Through a variety of distinct depictions, the artists employ prints and photographs to create a dialogue between the artist, subject, and viewer. These accessible and relatively inexpensive media frankly portray the migrant body as a site of cultural and political reconciliation. Each body represents a different culture, history, and identity that can still be abjectly categorized as a *mojado*. In each artwork, the body is transformed and presented as a unique individual in order to begin to break down stereotypes and exhibit the complexities of living in a country that, at times, is not accepting of migrants from Central and South America and the Caribbean. These depictions of Latinx lives

counter a narrative of nativism that privileges Anglo bodies in an ever-changing US national imaginary, redefining what constitutes American art and identity for *los mojudos*.

Especially when discussing migrant communities and art, it is crucial to mark the distinction between Latin American and Latinx art and communities. Latin American art is often associated with middle-to-upper-class politics and has historically had a larger presence in the art market, museum and private collections, and academia. Additionally, Latin American artists tend to be born and raised in Latin America and at times even artistically trained in European academies. Latinx art, on the other hand, usually evokes working-class politics from a community in the United States that encapsulates those descended from Latin Americans and who now proclaim a hyphenated, hybrid, and racialized identity. As an artist born in South America who moved to and created his works in the United States, Antonio Frasconi delicately balances these two distinct identifiers. Specifically, his woodcut *Los Desaparecidos II* (1981) meditates on the divide between US and Latin American history; his print strikingly commemorates those killed during the 1970s and 1980s under militaristic regimes in Argentina, Chile, and Uruguay that were supported by the United States.

Frasconi’s politically charged printmaking coincides with Chicax activist print media work. Produced within the framework of the Chicax art movement, Ester Hernández’s *Sun Mad* (1982; cover) is an example of the frequent use of vibrant prints in the US Southwest from the 1960s to the 1980s. Chicax communities—or, as Ruben Salazar defines them, Mexican Americans without an Anglo vision of themselves—fought for labor rights, protested the Vietnam War, and demanded the creation of new ethnic studies programs in California universities. During the movement, Chicax activists often used silkscreen prints, a relatively accessible and inexpensive medium, to spread messages of political protest and cultural revolution throughout their communities. Prints like *Sun Mad*, which pointedly criticizes the abuse of farm workers by Sun-Maid Growers of California through the evocation of Pop Art and direct appropriation of the company’s logo, continue the tradition of political silkscreen prints found in immigrant communities throughout the United

States. More recently, Luis Genaro Garcia's *Coatlicue's Legacy* (2018; left) celebrates the fifty-year anniversary of one of the most significant events in the Chicana rights movement—the East LA student walkouts protesting poor conditions and racist faculty.

One might consider the demands for equal rights and social justice in the Chicana community as an inevitable consequence of migration, as immigrant communities begin to search for their place within US society. The antagonizing of Latinos has been woven throughout the fabric of US history, despite lackluster efforts to reform immigration policy and create paths to citizenship. Sandra Fernández's serigraph *The Northern Triangle* (2018; right) highlights this ongoing pattern and demonstrates the ways that inconclusive border debates affect the lives of people today. Fernández's aesthetically calm yet haunting depiction of an unaccompanied minor fleeing the Northern Triangle (Guatemala, Honduras, and El Salvador) gives a face to the children who are lost on their way to or stuck at the border. The image underscores the humanitarian crisis occurring at the border at the time of writing this brochure, as thousands of people seeking asylum from life-threatening conditions in the Northern Triangle travel through Mexico and migrant children are caged in US-run detention centers. Despite these realities, the serigraph's Catholic iconography manages to also instill a sense of hope among immigrant communities in a time of grave uncertainty. The dangers of migration are also referenced in Richard Misrach's deeply ominous *Mochila, frontera cerca de Calexico, California* (2013). The large work poignantly demands that viewers consider the risk that environmental conditions pose to migrants crossing the US border and the power and limitations of bearing witness.

Misrach's image allows us to reflect on the role of photography in representing Latinx identities today, as people internalize border politics and attempt to construct an identity for themselves in a country with a highly politicized border. Accra Shepp's image *Yajaira, December 18, 2011*, from a portfolio of portraits of Occupy Wall Street protestors, directs our gaze to a young student demanding freedom through citizenship, whether it be for herself or for members of her community. Similarly, María Magdalena Campos-Pons challenges viewers to



reconsider their perceptions of the Latinx identity with her Polaroid *Untitled (Identity Could Be A Tragedy)* (1996), from the series *When I Am Not Here / Estoy Alla*. The image prompts us to think about the ways that Latinx communities often embody the bifurcated nature of the border—the feeling of having one foot in one's ancestral country and another foot in the United States. David Armstrong's *Enrique, Brooklyn* (2004), in turn, rethinks the Latinx identity and subjects in light of contemporary practices of representing in-betweenness through a queer lens. The positionality of Armstrong's subject, Enrique, allows us to consider the conditions that cause and sustain the migration of queer bodies into the United States for safety, further exposing the intersections of the migrant body and identity in contemporary art.

I believe that it is crucial to highlight the history of Latinx art, representation, and political activism in contemporary art as we attempt to create a comprehensive and inclusive US national imaginary. These artworks emphasize the vibrant and resilient bodies that represent a sizeable portion of this nation and give a voice to those who are unable to speak for themselves—out of fear of deportation or separation at the border, or because they did not live long enough to be heard. *Los mojados* have marked their stake in both Latinx and American art to expand and complicate our understanding of migrant bodies, lives, and histories in a national narrative that increasingly becomes their own.

Armando Pulido '19  
Class of 1954 Intern



## CHECKLIST

David Armstrong, American, 1954–2014. *Enrique, Brooklyn*, 2004. Gelatin silver print. Gift of Trevor Fairbrother and John T. Kirk; 2012.59.2.

María Magdalena Campos-Pons, Cuban, born 1959. *Untitled (Identity Could Be a Tragedy)*, from the series *When I Am Not Here / Estoy Alla*, 1996. Polaroid photograph. Purchased in honor of Hugh Freund, Class of 1967, Class of 2008P; 2008.7.

Sandra Fernández, American, born 1964. *The Northern Triangle*, 2018. Serigraph. Purchased through the Class of 1935 Memorial Fund; 2019.18.1.

Antonio Frasconi, Uruguayan and American (born Argentina), 1919–2013. *Los Desaparecidos II*, 1981. Woodcut on paper. Purchased through the William S. Rubin Fund; PR.984.20.

Luis Genaro Garcia, American, born 1978. *Coatlícue's Legacy*, 2018. 17-color serigraph printed at Self Help Graphics & Art. Purchased through the Class of 1935 Memorial Fund; 2019.18.2.

Ester Hernández, American, born 1944. *Sun Mad*, 1982. Screenprint on paper. Purchased through the Hood Museum of Art Acquisitions Fund; PR.2002.22.

Richard Misrach, American, born 1949. *Mochila, frontera cerca de Calexico, California*, 2013. Pigment print mounted to Dibond. Gift of the artist; 2017.72.2.

Accra Shepp, American, born 1962. *Yajaira, December 18, 2011*, from *Occupying Wall Street: A Portfolio of 20 Images*, 2011 (print 2015). Gelatin silver print. Purchased through a gift from Marina and Andrew E. Lewin, Class of 1981; 2017.37.10.

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The exhibition *Los Mojados: Migrant Bodies and Latinx Identities*, part of the museum's student-curated *A Space for Dialogue* series, is on view at the Hood Museum of Art, May 11–June 16, 2019.

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Cover: Ester Hernández, *Sun Mad*, 1982.

Inside left: Luis Genaro Garcia, *Coatlícue's Legacy*, 2018.

Inside right: Sandra Fernández, *The Northern Triangle*, 2018.

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