

Provocative Show Examines Immigration

By Molly Glentzer

Politically provocative, yet surprisingly serene, a new exhibit at the Asia Society Texas Center draws parallels between two immigrant populations, one historical, one of the present.

In “The Other Side: Chinese and Mexican Immigration to America,” curators Bridget Bray and Chip Tom explore how both have been exploited for their labor but blocked from citizenship.

“Maybe when people come to the Asia Society, they don’t think they’re going to learn about Mexican culture, but this is an opportunity to learn on a broader palette,” Bray said. “Art is a way we can diffuse some of that political static and actually get people talking to each other.”

A mountain of empty fortune cookies looms on a fragment of railroad track; a garden of soft-sculpture cacti stands in pots; romantically dyed linen canvases with snaking, painted lines trace the shape of the Rio Grande. A train whistle from a video installation drifts plaintively through each space.

These works are among five rooms of exceptionally executed, thoroughly researched works by six contemporary artists who convey ideas about memory, history, identity and humanity through different methods.

The first room offers a glimpse of 19th-century Chinese experiences in the American West, anchored by Hung Liu’s large painted portraits of pioneer women. The figures are borrowed from historical photographs made in Wyoming and Idaho in the late 19th century. Projecting stoic attitudes, they float in dreamlike fields where Indian paintbrush blooms beside ancient Asian butterfly motifs.

We see the figures in Zhi Lin’s video, the origin of the train whistle, from their back sides. They’re climbing aboard a vintage train, brandishing champagne bottles, during annual re-enactments of 1869’s golden nail ceremony in Promontory Point, Utah, where the transcontinental railroad was completed.

Although Chinese immigrants did the dirtiest, most dangerous work, they weren’t invited to that first celebration. Nor were they later allowed to become naturalized citizens, due to the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882. That law wasn’t repealed until World War II when the U.S. needed China’s cooperation and more factory workers.

“There’s this bizarre, tortured history in the U.S. of how the engines of economic growth were brought to fruition,” Bray said. “There’s still a push-pull tension between the need for labor to drive economic growth and the fear of having to share the success.”

The video of “‘Chinaman’s Chance’ on Promontory Summit: Golden Spike Celebration, 12:30 PM, 10th May 1869” occupies just the top portion of a horizontal panel. The bottom is a charcoal-and-oil painting that gives viewers the Chinese laborers’ perspective and also contains myriad rocks inscribed with the names of the 1,200 workers who died helping to build the railroad.

Another gallery considers how landscapes absorb the stories of individuals.

Margarita Cabrera created the cactus garden, whose plants are sewn together from the remnants of U.S. Border Patrol uniforms. She collaborates with Mexican immigrants who embroider scenes about their border-crossing experiences onto the fabric. If you’re moving through that desert landscape, your story becomes inscribed on the thorns of the plants themselves, Bray suggested.



Margarita Cabrera’s soft sculptures are among the works on view in “The Other Side.” In the background is one of Zhi Lin’s works on Chinese paper evoking the journey of a 19th century railroad worker.



Hung Liu’s installation of empty fortune cookies and a railroad fragment is on view at Asia Society Texas Center through July 19.



One of Blane De St. Croix’s pieces, part of a pair.

Zhi’s ghostly abstract ink images on Chinese paper curve across the room’s corners. Their colors evoke the journey of a 19th-century Chinese immigrant who might have crossed the Pacific on a boat not unlike a slave ship, toiled in the hot sun and died lighting fuses for the gunpowder he placed in rocky mountainsides.

Tony de los Reyes’ border series occupies another gallery. He’s not making a political statement but asking viewers to think about what borders mean, Bray said. De los Reyes uses satellite imagery of the Rio Grande as it flows between the U.S. and Mexico to define the shapes that appear on his dyed canvases. Technically virtuosic, with sophisticated color patterning, they also have painted elements reflecting his ideas about imposed elements on natural geography.

Hung Liu’s “Old Gold Mountain” gives the back room a maximal-minimal surprise: It’s a site-specific installation of 100,000 fortune cookies that rise from authentic railroad ties. The cookies are empty, a conceptual gesture reflecting how many 19th-century Chinese immigrants came to the U.S. hoping to build fortunes but instead met empty promises.

Blane De St. Croix’s magnificent sculpted and painted foam pieces represent the east and west ends of the U.S.-Mexico border, illustrating how

fences and walls in the rocky terrain around the Rio Grande must give way to the waters of the Gulf of Mexico and the Pacific Ocean.

Andrea Bowers’ large drawing “No Olvidado (Not Forgotten), no. 10” is like a monumental tombstone, inscribed with the names of people who have died trying to cross the border from Mexico into the U.S. The names are layered into an image of a chain-link fence topped with concertina wire. From a distance the whole thing looks like a print, but Bowers built the gray ombre background in beautiful sweeps of powdered graphite, every line done by hand.

“It’s a reminder to everyone coming through the door that this exhibition is about people: those who have made crossings and the artists themselves,” Bray said.

‘The Other Side’

WHEN: 10 am - 6pm Saturdays - Sundays, 11 am - 6pm, through July 19
WHERE: Asia Society Texas Center, 1370 Southmore
Tickets: free during AsiaFest Saturday, May 17; 713-496-9901, asiasociety.org/texas