



Photo by Allison McKellar.

A young girl above the site of the El Mozote massacre.

ART

Horrors and Dreams

By Claudia Bernardi

As part of the peace accords signed in 1992 that ended 12 years of civil war in El Salvador, the United Nations Truth Commission nominated the Argentine Forensic Anthropology Team (Equipo Argentino de Antropología Forense, EAAF) to perform the exhumations of the massacre at El Mozote, Morazán. According to the sole survivor, Rufina Amaya Márquez, the Salvadoran Army had murdered more than 1,000 civilians on December 11, 1981. Rufina saw her husband being decapitated and could identify the voices and screams of her own children before they were shot.

My task was to create the archeological maps that would record the location and finding of human remains, associated objects, and the presence of ballistic evidence. After three months of investigation, the allegation of mass murder against the civilian population was confirmed. Inside a small building known as The Convent (Site #1), from a total of nine archeological sites marked within the hamlet, EAAF

was able to differentiate the remains of 143 individuals, 136 of whom were children under age 12.

After the exhumation of El Mozote, I wondered: What might it be like to work in this place on art projects with children of the same age as those we were exhuming?

Four kilometers (2.5 miles) north of the location of that massacre, I founded the School of Art and Open Studio of Perquín, Walls of Hope, a community-based project of art, human rights, education, diplomacy, and community development using the strategies of art-making to rebuild regions torn apart by war. Since 2005, the Perquín model has been successfully reproduced in Guatemala, Colombia, Mexico, Argentina, Switzerland, Northern Ireland, Germany, and Serbia.

I am an artist, and my art is born from memory and loss. In parts of the world affected by war and violence, I design and facilitate art through community projects. In these efforts, the creation of collaborative and community-based murals painted by victims of violence offers a new

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The pink crosses of a memorial to the femicides of Ciudad Juárez.

model of art practice in which ethics, aesthetics, and politics merge.

“We Are Raised by Wolves”

The words of a Honduran boy, age 16, graphically capture the realities of Central American children who make the dangerous border crossing from Mexico into the United States, traveling without parents or guardians. According to the U.S. Government Accountability Office, in fiscal year 2014 alone, nearly 57,000 unaccompanied, undocumented minors were apprehended by federal immigration officers and transferred to the care of the Department of Health and Human Services’ Office of Refugee Resettlement (ORR). In fiscal year 2015, this number was nearly 34,000, a dramatic increase from the 6,000 minors placed in ORR’s care in 2011. Most of these youngsters are from El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras, and Mexico, and as many as 20 percent of them are under age 12. They crossed the U.S.–Mexico border fleeing extreme poverty, gang violence, and drug trafficking.

The border, *la frontera*, has become the most recent geographic epicenter where collaborative and community-based murals were painted by youth affected by the effects of violence. This visual investigation traces these youngsters’ traumatic journeys from Ciudad Juárez

through their crossing of the U.S.–Mexico border. The murals are oral histories made into visual representations; they trace whispers of unspoken words and follow fragile steps on sand.

Painting the Experience of Ciudad Juárez

After my flight landed in El Paso, Texas, I took a taxi from El Paso International Airport to the U.S.–Mexico border. In a ride of less than 20 minutes, I changed country, language, and currency, and I entered one of the most dangerous cities in the world.

While El Paso is among the safest cities in the United States, Ciudad Juárez has the sad reputation of being one of the most violent cities in Latin America. Between these antipodes, the incessant crossing — legally or illegally — from one side to the other of the U.S.–Mexico border impacts the lives of countless people.

The International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) asked me to create a pilot mural project using the visual arts as a liaison among youth affected by violence. “Walls of Hope, Ciudad Juárez, Mexico,” was a collaborative, community-based mural project developed June 8–16, 2013, involving 26 youths, ages 13 to 17. The ICRC, the Mexican Red Cross, and the psychological program Abriendo Espacios Humanitarios (Opening Humanitarian

Spaces) worked in partnership with the School of Art of Perquín, El Salvador. Three artists/teachers also helped to facilitate the young people’s art.

Over the course of the project, 26 Mexican teenagers designed and painted a mural on a canvas six feet high by 30 feet long. Through their creative efforts, they shared moving visual testimonies of a contemporary situation that is completely hidden or incorrectly and insufficiently known in the United States.

Tracing Past, Present, and Future

The Ciudad Juárez mural can be read from left to right, from past to present and into the future, starting with the vast desert opening to a cotton field. It evokes the region’s past, early in the 20th century, when the Río Bravo crossing was full of life and the U.S.–Mexico border impacted the local economy. This prosperous agricultural commerce abruptly declined when the profitable drug trade replaced cotton production.

In the mural, a bus takes yet another migrant. People leave Ciudad Juárez seeking better working conditions. Others, fearing the drug wars, leave with no intention of returning. Nearly all the homicides in Ciudad Juárez can be considered “drug related.” Hundreds of Mexicans, Salvadorans, Guatemalans, and Hondurans cross the

Participants start work on the Juárez mural.



Photo courtesy of Claudia Bernardi.

U.S.–Mexico border every day, sometimes in a vehicle but most often on foot, running desperately and hoping that *la migra*, the border patrol, will not arrest them.

If they manage to cross the border, they will walk through an overwhelming extension of rock and sand, where there are no trees or shelter, where there will be no water for miles, where many have already perished trying to “make it.” The summer is scorching, but the winter is no more benevolent. Temperatures can easily drop below zero. The remains of countless people are scattered throughout the desert. They died of hunger, dehydration, extreme heat, or punishing cold. They died in poverty, in fear, mistreated, brutalized, yet still hoping for a better future.

On the main road, an orange figure — someone not identified as male or female — curls in a fetal position, wrapped in fragility. Are they sleeping or dead? Are they waiting for this bus or for another one? Have they come from far away or are they lamenting their imminent departure? The desert is full of questions that no one dares ask and no one answers.

In the desert, a wounded woman with purple marks on her body and pain in her soul is trying to protect herself from further violence. It is hard to know whether she is facing an imminent death or if she recently survived a near-fatal threat. To her left, weapons, money, and fiery

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Photo courtesy of Claudia Bernardi.

A bruised woman forms one of the central images of the Juárez mural.

explosions chain her to a present where magenta crosses in the background identify the dead and disappeared women of Juárez.

The central part of the mural represents the present. It is illuminated by a shining full moon. A child is jailed behind bars within a watchful eye. The youth of Ciudad Juárez are forced to accept basic rules of “safety.” They cannot go out at night; they should never be alone. They obey a curfew imposed by common sense as a tool of survival. This child cannot leave Ciudad Juárez. Not today, not alive.

The path from the present into the future is marked by a painter’s pallet, each color showing what the young people from Juárez want: art, music, sports, community-based projects. A creative hand renders life and hope.

In the far-right section of the mural — the future — two hands meet in solidarity to celebrate sports, art, and the promotion of local industry that could lead to new jobs. The young artists from Ciudad Juárez know that the incommensurable profit of the drug industry exists not only because Mexico sells drugs, but because the United States buys them. The young muralists proposed that cotton plantations be prioritized over other crops to create a safe, sustainable local agriculture, connecting the past to the future.

By consensus, the mural was christened: “Juárez no es como lo pintan sino como lo vives” (Juárez is not what they’ve told you, but what you experience).

A Tree of Life Grows in Juvenile Detention

In March 2003, the care for and placement of undocumented, unaccompanied minors was assigned to the Office of Refugee Resettlement. Since that time, the ORR has received more than 175,000 children under age 17 from Department of Homeland Security immigration officials. After they have suffered abuse and violence linked to poverty, gangs, and cartels in their homelands, these children struggle to survive crossing the U.S.–Mexico border. On this journey, they may become victims of human trafficking and exploitation; they may also end up in the U.S. justice system for a range of reasons.

In May 2015, a group of undocumented, unaccompanied Central American youths, age 13 to 17, who were being held in a Juvenile Detention Center in the United States, took part in this community-based, collaborative mural project. Using professional mural paint on canvas, the participating immigrant youth painted a mural six feet high and 30 feet long that narrated their personal and communal memories

marked by violence and the threat of violence while crossing the U.S.–Mexico border. This unprecedented effort within the U.S. criminal justice system used art to allow the incarcerated youth to speak safely about the reasons they left their homelands and the brutality they suffered during the perilous crossing of the U.S.–Mexico border.

The 55 participating girls and boys drew images that contained a journalistic directness, with documentary starkness and facts that delivered an alarming message. Although no one dared to say it, while painting this mural we were hugely aware that at the end of the day, many of us would go “home” to meet friends and family and share dinner and lively conversation, while the youth identified as “illegal” would remain incarcerated.

At the end, one 16-year-old Nicaraguan girl said, “I want to thank you for this mural project that reminds me that I can still love. I made many new friends among you all. But now, I need to forget about love in order to survive.”

A plea to end the violence in Honduras drawn by one of the young artists.

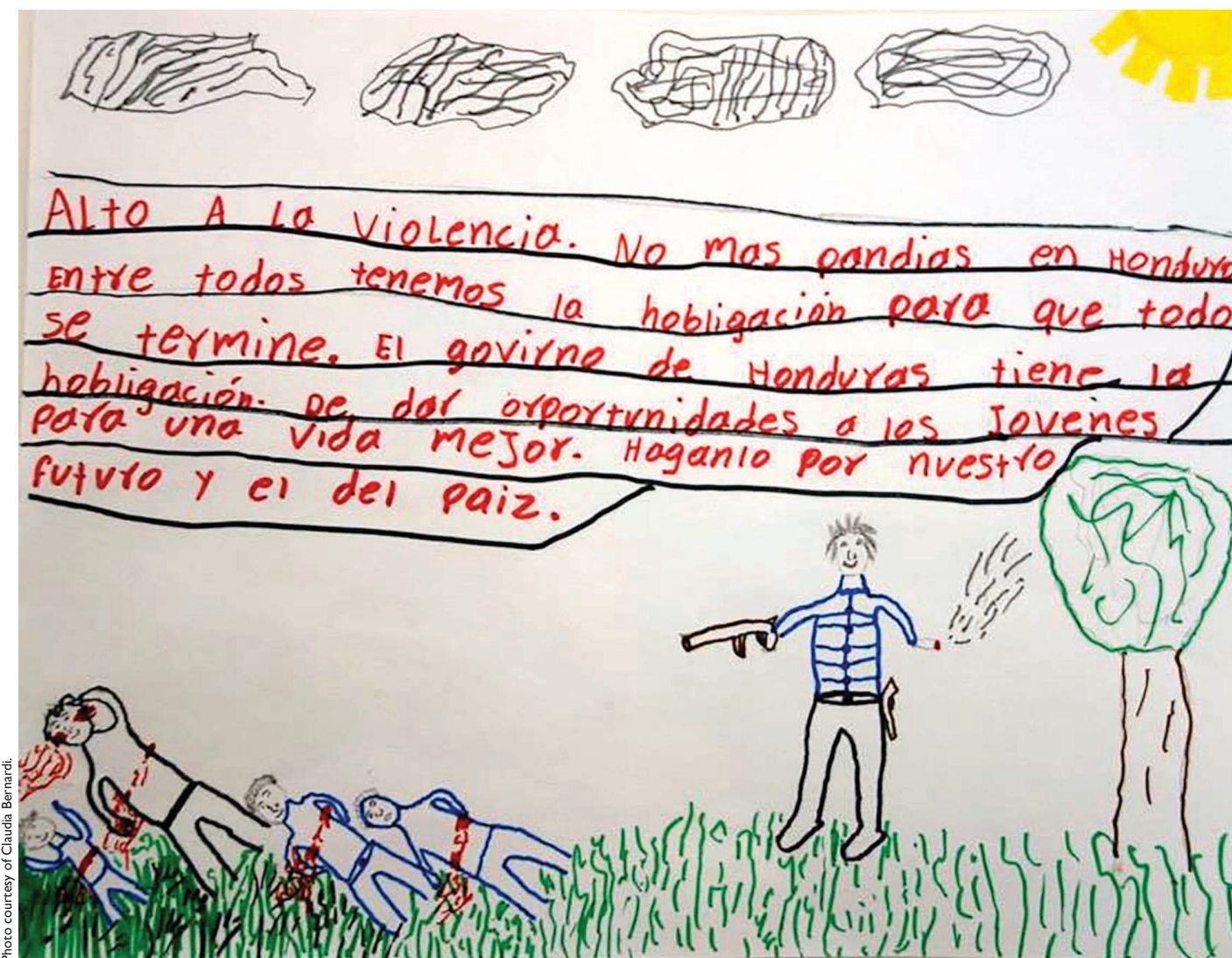


Photo courtesy of Claudia Bernardi.

Imagining a Bridge to a Dignified Life

On the far left of the mural, the young artists’ testimony begins with a group of people initiating the perilous journey at night. Assisted only by an inflatable boat, they are hoping to not drown in the turbulent waters of the river. Many will not succeed. Some of the undocumented immigrants will disappear before reaching the United States. The river seems the last and final challenge. In reality, the crossing is just starting.

Crossing the desert is equally treacherous and unpredictable. Along the way, they will find organized crime and drug trafficking. In the foreground of the mural, amputated human remains appear adjacent to a barrel of acid. Towards the background, people run away to avoid becoming victims themselves or being forced to commit unspeakable crimes.

The mural’s overarching narrative is echoed in smaller, surrounding panels that constitute a “border” of history. In one of these biographical snapshots, a

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16-year-old Honduran boy remembers the day that his father died. It was the boy's birthday. The following day, he left Honduras, driven by fear and sorrow.

In another small panel, a 14-year-old Guatemalan girl painted herself in a "secure facility" in the United States. Her story is brutal and untold. She is looking at us and crying. We are seeing her from far away. If the migrants manage to cross to the United States, they will be trapped within the labyrinth of immigration laws, undocumented status, jail, and deportation.

The centerpiece of the mural is "El Arbol de la Vida" (The Tree of Life). Bright, powerful, and generous, it expands to bridge the pain of crossing towards the possibility of dignified life in the United States. A *torogoz*, a Salvadoran bird of magnificent colors, flies to its nest in the Tree of Life. Its presence heals a hand that has been wounded and trapped. On the other side of the tree, the same hand appears to be in full bloom. Someone rests under the tree, reflecting on how to design one's life from now on.

Most murals have timelines from past to present to future, but "The Tree of Life" mural is narrated in a continuous present: present at the border; present when they face violence and brutality or when they are forced to commit crimes; present if they manage to make it to the United States.

Before starting the long journey to the North, the unaccompanied minors had dreams and hopes that now feel unreachable. Their past is filled with stories of poverty, threat, drug trafficking, and death. Their present is perilous, fragile. Many of them believe that being detained in a juvenile center may be safer than returning to their home countries. They hardly understand the U.S. justice system that identifies them not as victims, but as criminals.

Understanding the message of these murals leads us to an unavoidable question: How can we help you?

An Argentine painter, printmaker, and installation artist, Claudia Bernardi is a professor of community arts at California College of the Arts. She spoke for CLAS on September 21, 2015.

UC Berkeley's Multicultural Community Center exhibited "The Tree of Life," April 4–14, 2016.



"The Tree of Life."
(Photo by Miguel Oropeza Caballero.)