



New exhibition breaks piñata wall, brings people together

By Alexis Tarrazas
September 23, 2016



Isaias D. Rodriguez holds up one of the small piñatas he made for the “Estamos en Contra del Muro” (“We Are Against the Wall”) exhibition by Sita Kuratomi Bhaumik at Southern Exposure Gallery, Sep. 4, 2016. Photo: Jessica Webb.

As the Republican presidential candidate has loudly and repeatedly vowed—among other things—to build a wall along the United States’ southern border to keep Mexican immigrants out, a Bay Area-based artist hired two Mexican immigrants to likewise build a wall—out of piñatas—to bring people together and denounce hate, brick by brick.

During the opening reception of “We Are Against the Wall,” people gathered at Southern Exposure, a nonprofit art gallery on 20th and Alabama streets in the Mission District.

Artist Sita Bhaumik debuted her piñata wall project, which is composed of nearly 400 piñata bricks and stands eight feet tall and 11 feet wide, on Sept. 9.

Bhaumik commissioned Victor Martinez and Francisco “Paco” Leon, owners of Piñatas Las Morenitas Martinez in Oakland, to make the piñata bricks for the project.

“As we all know, this election season has been just really frightening and incredible,” Bhaumik said. “This issue of immigration, which always is a topic of discussion in American politics, has just taken this really incredibly ugly and painful turn. So I thought of the responsibility to address that as an artist, with the show being right before the election.”

Bhaumik first pitched the idea to her curator Michele Carlson last year. But as momentum for the wall—and the candidate pushing for it—increased, Bhaumik’s project became ever more relevant.

“To me, the fact that it’s a proposal is one of the most frightening things, because it’s an idea,” Bhaumik. “And people are getting behind it. It’s a rallying cry for folks to get excited. And get excited about what? This thing that means—to me—racism and hatred and xenophobia and division of people.”

Though the art project is an obvious reference to the proposed border wall at the U.S.-Mexico border, Bhaumik also drew inspiration from the Berlin Wall and the more recent Israeli West Bank barrier (often referred to as the “Apartheid Wall”) one that separates Palestinians from each other.

There is however a reason why Bhaumik specifically chose piñatas: Bhaumik’s mother, who is Japanese-Colombian, told her that in Colombia, they would break seven-pointed ceramic piñatas at Christmas, a symbolic gesture to destroy the “seven deadly sins.”

“So for me, the wall is like an eighth deadly sin,” said Bhaumik. “And to me, it’s always been strange to love something so much that you’d want to make a piñata out of it and want to smash it. And it’s because it’s really supposed to represent evil. And you smashing the piñata represents your rejection of evil.”

But it was the profession of piñata making that Martinez, a native of Zacoalco de Torres, Jalisco, found a way to support his family. Always interested in expressing his creativity by working with his hands, Martinez began making piñatas in Mexico in 2004. He immigrated to the United States in 2006, where he began a decade-long stint working in construction.



Sita Kuratomi Bhaumik in front of the wall of piñatas for the *Estamos Contra el Muro (We Are Against the Wall)* exhibition at the Southern Exposure Gallery on September 4, 2016. Photo: Jessica Webb.

It was there in construction where he would meet another Mexican immigrant Francisco Leon, who would become his eventual business partner and close friend. The two opened their piñata store in Oakland about a year ago. They no longer work in construction.

“I stepped up to work on this project because, apart from promoting our own business, we want to raise a consciences in people,” Martinez said. “So that they don’t vote and stand behind the ideas of one person, whose message is based on racism.”

Leon agreed.

“This affects us and many Latinos. Personally, I’m against a wall. That’s why we are very pleased to be involved in helping with this project,” said Leon, who is a native of Puebla. “What I think Sita is doing is raising awareness but at the same time, it’s something fun and something where people can release anger.”

People attending the closing ceremony at Southern Exposure will get a chance to release that anger on Oct. 15, when attendees will bash the piñata wall until it no longer stands.

“They exist to be destroyed. You don’t buy a piñata and hold on to it for 20, 30 or 100 years. You buy it to destroy it,” Bhaumik said. “And for me the only reason to build a wall is to destroy it. And what better form than a piñata.”