

Trump Meets His Wall at Southern Exposure

By Liliana Michelena
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Artist Sita Bhaumik. Photo by Liliana Michelena

The writing on the 8 by 10 foot wall — inspired by Donald Trump’s proposed 55 feet border wall — is pretty clear.

“Hi mom, I’m on the other side.”

“Your sacrifice does not go unnoticed, mami and papi.”

“We’re not criminals, we’re buddies,” another person has written in Spanish.

As any structure built to divide, artist Sita Bhaumik’s wall has already been vandalized by graffiti from the Mission District’s youth and guest artists – this time by invitation. Hovering over the floor of Southern Exposure’s gallery,

the wall is the main feature of the exhibition “We are against the wall/Estamos contra el muro,” a direct reference to Trump’s promise to build such a barrier between the United States and Mexico.

Walls are erected to protect, segregate, and enact power. People relate to them in constant flux, moving over and around them and, in Bhaumik’s case, activating them through art. But, eventually, walls will be torn down. Bhaumik has made such a feat accessible for everyone: all of her bricks are made of piñata.

The Eighth Sin

Born in Los Angeles to a West Bengal father and a Japanese-Colombian mother, Sita Bhaumik had other, more classical plans for her exhibition, originally scheduled for earlier in the year. Used to bring scent, touch, and sound to the gallery scene, she noticed that the talk around Trump’s proposal for a border wall was not going away. She had to address it.

“If not for this election season, we would have done everything in the walls [of the gallery], not *in the wall*,” she said.

During the creative process, she figured that, if she was going to build something that should not even exist, she might as well do it in a material that exists to be destroyed.

Looking to support her own Latin American community, she found Víctor Martínez and Francisco León, partners at Piñatas Las Morenitas Martínez, near the Fruitvale Bart station.

“A 400 bricks order was very different from what we have ever done,” said Martínez, a soft-spoken piñata maker, more accustomed to the classical seven-pointed star, Disney characters, and even bachelor and bachelorette party favors.

Still, it made sense to him. Born in Jalisco, Mexico, the artisan was already a piñata expert before he came to California a decade ago, and he knows his piñata history well.

“It began as a religious tradition of Christmas, where Spaniard friars and indigenous Mexicans would smash the seven points that represented the seven deadly sins,” he said. “It was the absolution of all the sins of that year.”

Colonialism and migration have changed that meaning and the piñata’s materials. The smashing of it is now a more playful celebration and, in the case of the political piñatas, a cathartic moment. With her wall, Bhaumik wanted to bring all that history together again.

“The wall is the eighth deadly sin: xenophobia and hatred.”

Back to the past

Nearby, a miniature of the candidate looks at a scale model of Donald Trump’s proposed 55-foot border.

“What a fucking moron he looks like,” said Isaías Rodríguez, the mini-piñata artist who made the little wall and the piñata souvenirs.

“I made this to reflect the absurdity of such a notion,” he added.

The disgust with the Republican candidate runs high among the artists and people attending, but there was no Trump around to smash. Martínez, who had enough papier-maché Trumps to offer, was surprised by the absence at first. But Bhaumik wanted the discussion to be even bigger than the man.

“Under Obama there have been more people deported, Hillary [Clinton] is also proposing a reinforcement of the border wall, so the problem doesn’t start or end with him,” she emphasizes.

“It has a lot to do with xenophobia and dividing people, which is the old strategy of colonialism: to pit people against each other. And politicians are resurrecting this idea of walls to separate all over the world.”

Martínez, still impressed by the wall he helped build, calls it a “symbol of destruction,” of what they don’t want.

“This guy wants to separate us with walls, but we break another wall by being united.”

Artists and guests will break this particular wall with the same anger they dedicate to the Trump piñata-smashing. On a party to be held on October 15 at 4 p.m., surrounded by loved ones and Latin American music and food, all the guests, young and old, will line up to bash the wall until it no longer stands.