

VIDEO: Instead of Dividing, a Border Wall of Piñatas Brings a Community Together

By Kelly Whalen and Sarah Hotchkiss
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Artist Sita Kuratomi Bhaumik (center) with the makers at Piñatas Las Morenitas (Photo: Kelly Whalen).

The plural pronoun in *Estamos contra el muro / We Are Against the Wall*, the title of Sita Kuratomi Bhaumik’s recent exhibition at San Francisco nonprofit Southern Exposure, was no casual stylistic decision.

The installation of hundreds of handmade brick-shaped piñatas, assembled to mimic the border wall between the United States and Mexico, was a deeply collaborative cross-cultural project — spearheaded by Bhaumik, yes, but realized by countless artists, makers and community members.

Bhaumik, the first-generation daughter of two immigrants (her father is from West Bengal, her mother is Japanese Colombian), constantly seeks out intersections between communities of color in her artistic practice, whether those intersections occur in food, physical space, or social and political causes.

For *We Are Against the Wall*, Bhaumik’s collaborators hailed from as far away as Mexico to as close as Noe Valley; each held a personal stake in the project. Victor Martínez at Oakland’s Piñatas Las Morenitas fabricated most of the gray tissue-paper-covered blocks, with his partner Francisco León. Miniature piñatas by Isaías D. Rodríguez, aka the Little Piñata Maker, provided a scale model of presidential nominee Donald Trump’s proposed expansions to the existing border wall. And throughout the exhibition, a soundtrack of migration-themed songs selected by La Pelanga DJ collective filled the gallery space.

But Bhaumik’s wall truly came to life when Cece Carpio of the art collective Trust Your Struggle “defaced” the piñatas with spray-painted slogans like “The hands that build can also tear down.” Participants in the Young

Queens on the Rise program of Mission Girls added their own personal messages. Suddenly, the piñata wall wasn't just a symbolic boundary line, but a repository for the thoughts and feelings of the people the real wall attempts to separate.

Those feelings reached their ultimate cathartic release on Oct. 15, at the project's community demolition party, a piñata wall smashing fueled by food prepared by Bhaumik and chef Norma Listman. As the wall came crashing down, the piñatas burst open to reveal packets of hot sauce and devalued Mexican pesos, Bhaumik's tongue-in-cheek reference to Trump's call for Mexico to fund his border wall plans.

"The only reason to build a wall in my opinion is to destroy it," Bhaumik says. Triumphant.

Video by Kelly Whalen, Text by Sarah Hotchkiss