

ERRE

THEM AND US

MASS MoCA

The U.S.-Mexico border has been front page news and the subject of heated debate since Donald Trump first declared it a top priority to build a wall along the nearly 2,000-mile boundary. Since then, tougher immigration policies coupled with a dramatic surge in the number of Central and South Americans seeking asylum in the U.S. have created what many see as a humanitarian crisis, and what others see as a national security and an economic issue. The artist known as ERRE (as in the rolled “r” of Spanish) has been addressing the border in his work for over three decades, examining its oft-forgotten history,¹ shifting contours, and its social, economic, and political implications. Living and working between Tijuana and San Diego, ERRE’s home is not far from the San Ysidro Port of Entry, the main passage between the two cities he calls home—and one of the busiest borders in the world. The endless flow of people and goods—in both directions—spotlights the inextricable ties between the two cities as well as those of Mexico and the U.S. more broadly.

For those of us who live far from the country’s southern boundary and for whom the idea of the wall can seem like a political abstraction, ERRE brings to MASS MoCA a palpable manifestation of the existing barrier that is a part of daily life in the border region and a part of regular negotiations of identity, dividing people between this country and that, documented and undocumented, i.e. “US” and “THEM.” The sculpture *Of Fence* (2017) is a recreation of the structure that is already a powerful physical and psychological fact in Tijuana, where houses, restaurants, and beaches butt up against the weathered barricade. At MASS MoCA, the 120-foot long rusty-red metal obstacle is paired with

a smaller wall of shimmering text. The stanza from Langston Hughes’ 1936 poem *Let America Be America Again* reads:

*O, let my land be a land where Liberty
Is crowned with no false patriotic wreath,
But opportunity is real, and life is free,
Equality is in the air we breathe*

The wishful words of the influential Harlem Renaissance writer are as apt for these times as they were 80 years ago when Hughes was imagining equality for all people and yearning for an American dream that is deferred for many. Hughes’ title is oddly reminiscent of Trump’s slogan “Make America Great Again,” though the current policies associated with it are a far cry from Hughes’ vision of a future when “equality is in the air we breathe.” Hughes’ stanza brings to mind instead the oft-quoted words from Emma Lazarus’ sonnet immortalized on a plaque at the Statue of Liberty since 1903, which entreats:

*Give me your tired, your poor,
Your huddled masses yearning
to breathe free...*

Yet ERRE quickly reminds us of the more bureaucratic words that often greet people at the border. On the doors leading into the interior gallery, questions that border agents routinely ask are cut out of black vinyl strips arranged vertically like the bars of a cage: “Where Were You Born?” “Where Do You Live?” “What is Your Occupation?” These inquiries seem straightforward, but do little to impart who we really are or recognize complex layers of identity and nationality, functioning as their own kind of barrier. Indeed, for many of the millions of people who live along the border, or who live in Mexico and work in the U.S. (or vice versa), or for those whose parents, or sisters, or cousins live on one side, while they live on the other, and for those whose ancestors lived on what was once Mexican homeland but is

1 Over 500,000 square miles of land that now makes up all or parts of California, New Mexico, Arizona, Colorado, Utah, Nevada and Wyoming was once part of Mexico, ceded, along with Texas, to the United States in 1848 at the end of the Mexican-American war.



Toy-an Horse, InSite '97
Photo by Philipp Scholz Ritterman

now part of the United States, the either/or choices offered at the border—like many binary notions of identity—are insufficient.

ERRE's work often emphasizes the interconnectedness of the U.S. and Mexico. Perhaps his best-known piece, created in 1997 for InSite, an international art festival that takes place in both Tijuana and San Diego, is a 33-foot-tall wooden horse with two heads. (An enlarged image of the sculpture functions as a backdrop to the exhibition). Referencing the Trojan horse of Greek mythology, the monumental, hollow structure on wheels was placed at the marker that denotes the geographical border line. Sharing a single body, the two heads faced north to the U.S. and south to Mexico and symbolized the two countries' interdependence. Yet, by invoking the Greeks' entry into Troy, the towering structure also made references to war; one might think of the Mexican-American War and the U.S. occupation of major Mexican cities before the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo of 1848. Or the Trojan subterfuge might bring to mind recent reports of undocumented immigrants entering the U.S. concealed within the trailer beds of commercial

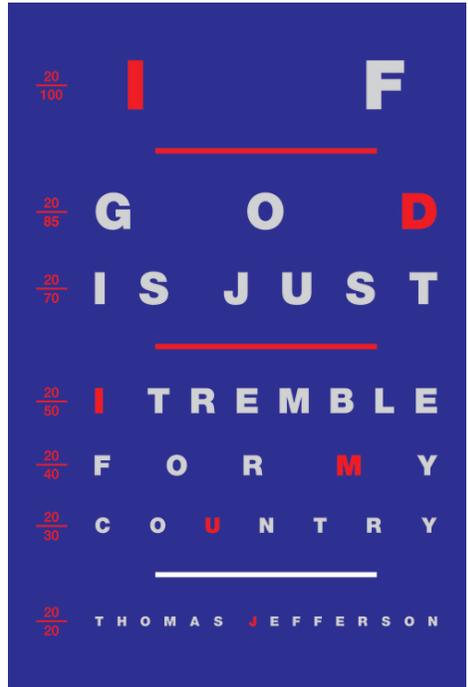
trucks. The title of the work, *Toy an-Horse*, is yet another play on words referencing childhood, both the artist's own (when he first learned the story of the Trojan Horse) and that of his children who were three and five when he created the toy-like work. Given the recent separations of children from their parents at the border, the image of the cage-like structure takes on added meaning.

Across from this photograph, a chain link fence, ubiquitous to institutional spaces from schools to prisons, creates two passages and a choice for entering the gallery. The two options are marked by signs which read "THEM" and "US" on the front, (the general "US" also suggesting the United States) and "nos" "otros" on the back. Language and wordplay are central to ERRE's practice, which tease out the many ways language can act as a wall, be wielded as a weapon, perpetuate stereotypes, or be revelatory. His title, *Of Fence*, for example, spells out a variation of the word "offense." The double meaning is clear, with the wall acting as a deterrent to the offense of illegally crossing the border, while the crude barricade itself is a visual offense both to the natural landscape and the communities it separates. ERRE wields text again in a series of "Eye Charts" which point to various

kinds of cultural or social blindness. A series of quotes, some in English, some in Spanish, are laid out in the format of the familiar vision test with rows of letters of diminishing size. The easily-read texts at top often provoke assumptions that are turned on their head when readers make out the smaller lettering. “We are Americans When We Go to War,” begins a quote by former U.S. Senator Dennis Chavez. “and When We Return We are Mexicans.” “God Made Me an Indian,” read the words of Sitting Bull. Drawing these statements from various cultures and time periods, ERRE suggests a broader human concern with political and social hierarchies—and the oppression that is the result—that are witnessed both between the United States and Mexico, and *within* the two countries and elsewhere.

At MASS MoCA, ERRE has placed the large heads of his iconic horse, now disembodied and charred black, on the floor in the center of the gallery and arranged them to resemble the yin-yang symbol. They emphasize both the similarities and the symbiotic relationship between the U.S. and Mexico despite the recent damage to our ties. They also act as a hinge between the two sides of the space, one anchored by an American flag, the other by an adaptation of the Mexican tricolor. *Stripes and Fence Forever (Homage to Jasper Johns)*, 2014, again draws on the aesthetics of the border wall, while playing off of artist Jasper Johns’ famous renderings of the national symbol which he noted is “seen and not looked at, not examined.” The flag connotes the aspirations that many of us share and which draw so many to the States—liberty, justice, as well as economic opportunity. The rusted patina of ERRE’s fence-like version hints at the unexpected consequences—even the deterioration—of those dreams and their inaccessibility for many.

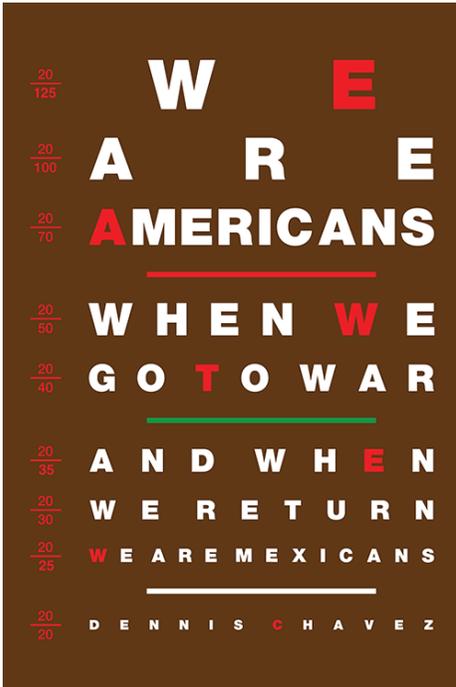
In more recent works on the “American” side of the exhibition, ERRE makes pointed references to the prison industrial complex that disproportionately incarcerates African-Americans and Hispanics (who as of 2015 made up less than a third of the



Eye Chart: Thomas Jefferson, 2019. Inkjet print on aluminum composite panel, 36 x 24 inches

population but represent more than half of those imprisoned). *Orange Country* (2019), with its four prison jumpsuits in varied sizes including an infant-sized garment with frilly sleeves, is a reminder that too many families are affected by this system and can easily be read as a comment on the current dehumanizing detainment of children at the border. *The Cell/La celda* (2019), an enclosure just big enough for a single person, conjures images of the solitary confinement many prisoners are subjected to—as well as a manifestation of the more existential prisons constructed by the bodies or the skin or the labels that we live with.

While ERRE’s recent works take a critical look at the U.S., he looks just as unflinchingly at Mexico. At the far end of the space, the artist has depicted the tricolor Mexican flag as three separate panels, a nod to the divisions within a country which struggles to reconcile its identity, its colonial and indigenous histories, and the stark inequities



Eye Chart: Dennis Chavez, 2019. Inkjet print on aluminum composite panel, 36 x 24 inches

between rich and poor. The artist has subtly altered the symbol of Mexico (based on an Aztec legend)—an eagle on a cactus with a snake in its mouth. In ERRE’s version, the rattlesnake bites back, perhaps a call to action or a warning to those in power. The prescient work, titled *Democracy 2000*, was made ahead of the 2000 election that focused on government corruption and which witnessed the defeat of the ruling party which had been in power since 1929. In front of the flag, an ornate, four-post Mahogany bed, carved with both Spanish and Aztec iconography sits on a carpet of corn. Nearby, a chest carved from the valuable wood sits on four Aztec deities—a reminder that much of the riches that Spain sought in Meso-America (and precipitated the ongoing subjugation of its indigenous people) were its natural resources. *Presidential Bed (La Cama Presidential)* (2000) also grapples with the lingering Colonial legacy. The mattress is made of nearly 2000 nails, with a cluster in the center forming the topographic shape of

modern Mexico. This “bed of nails,” made before Vicente Fox’s presidential victory, is a prediction of the difficulties the new leader would face in a fragmented county. The corn (or maize) is a powerful cultural symbol, rooted in indigenous belief systems, and an important crop, as well as a staple of the country’s cuisine. In the context of this work it also takes on yet more political and economic significance. Following the activation of the North American Trade Agreement (NAFTA) in 1994, subsidized corn from the U.S. flooded the Mexican market, pushing out small, rural subsistence farmers. The subsequent rise of Mexican immigrants into the U.S. has been tied, in part, to these economic pressures.

ERRE also takes on the subject of Mexico’s drug cartels. In his video *The Body of Crime (The Black Suburban)* (2008), the artist stages a violent murder linked to the drug wars. Playing the part of the three main protagonists: the assassin, his victim, and the investigator, ERRE emphasizes how all levels of society are touched by the violence—and how all citizens are responsible for changing it. The black Chevy Suburbans, driven by all three characters suggest the shared aspirations of power and wealth that drive the drug trade, while the iconic American SUV also implicates the U.S. market and its voracious appetite for the contraband.

Overall, ERRE’s interrogation of the U.S. and Mexico, their strong ties, and the struggles at the border acts as a lens through which he addresses more generalized divisions between people everywhere. Two works from “The Road to Perdition” series, for example, expose violence perpetrated by the two countries upon their own people. *Friendly Fire* lists the locations and dates of the killing of African-Americans by U.S. police. The distances measure the miles between each site and the U.S./Mexico border. *Fuego Amigo* lists bloodshed manifested upon civilians by the Mexican government, ranging from the 1906 Sonora massacre of mine workers to the recent 2016 police shooting of student protestors in Oaxaca.

ERRE's unyielding commitment over 30 years to expose these wounds and abuses of power are coupled with his impulse to draw connections. Back outside the interior gallery, the oldest and the newest works on view express these sentiments. *Sing-Sing* (1999) is an iron cage, shaped like a heart. Inside hangs a bed, like a perch in a birdcage. Named for the famous prison outside of New York, the work recognizes the attachments—the love that we feel for our countries, our families—can both protect and imprison us. *Burned Bridges (for Pablo and Efrén)* merges two types of construction, one simple and precarious-looking in old, scrap wood, the other more modern and highly-engineered in new white pine—but with its floor missing. The two halves symbolize various cultural differences between Mexico and the U.S., while challenging accepted hierarchies and expectations. Scorched where the two sides meet, the piece manifests the damage to the two countries' relationship while suggesting that one's failure means that of the other.

— Susan Cross

Marcos Ramírez, known as ERRE (a nod to the rolled 'r' of Spanish), was born in Tijuana in 1961. He studied at the Universidad Autónoma de Baja California, graduating with a law degree, and later worked in the construction industry for many years to support his visual art practice. He has been the subject of a number of solo exhibitions at institutions including nGbk, Berlin (2018), the Museum of Contemporary Art San Diego, San Diego (2016), Museum of Latin American Art, Long Beach, CA (2014), MACLA/ Movimiento de Arte y Cultura Latino Americana, San Jose, CA (2012), and Museo de Arte Carrillo Gil, Mexico City (2010). He has also participated in group exhibitions at the Oceanside Museum of Art, Oceanside, CA (2017–18); Today Art Museum, Beijing (2016–17); SITE Santa Fe Biennial, Santa Fe (2014); the California Biennial, Orange County Museum of Art, Newport Beach, CA (2008); Moscow Biennale, Moscow (2007); Bienal São Paulo-Valencia, Valencia, Spain (2007); Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofía, Madrid (2005); Havana Biennial, Havana (2000); the Whitney Biennial, New York (2000); and InSite 1997 and 2000 editions in the San Diego/ Tijuana border region. He recently completed a permanent sculpture for the San Ysidro Land Port of Entry which was commissioned by the U.S. General Services Administration (GSA).

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Front Covers: Detail of *Of Fence*, Oceanside Museum of Art, Oceanside, CA, 2017. Mixed media on corrugated metal, with vinyl.

