

**Enrique Chagoya,
*Detention at the Border of Language***

Edgewood College Gallery, Madison, WI

Curated by David Wells

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Printmaker and Stanford professor Enrique Chagoya keeps a reviewer honest. Any mystification or jargon that a critic may employ in assessing his work might wind up quoted and lampooned in a future artwork. Chagoya turns the tables on critics who are used to having the final word—part of a strategy he calls reverse anthropology. Fortunately, he balances this critical look at the art world with access points for general audiences, including pop culture and current events. As for the more esoteric references, they are hardly anything for art world insiders to be proud of. Nods to Albert Bierstadt, George Caleb Bingham, and Karl Ferdinand Wimar show the long entanglement of Western art and settler colonialism. This makes the Edgewood College Gallery exhibition, *Detention at the Border of Language*, which closed in

March, a fitting contribution to the Southern Graphics Council International conference, around which the show was organized. This year's theme was "Our Shared Future" and the conference website proclaimed: "Printmaking can deepen our understanding of the world, inherently challenge systems of oppression, and can push against histories of colonization, unwarranted violence, and systemic racism."

Chagoya is a 2022 recipient of the SGCIL Lifetime Achievement in Printmaking Award, and the exhibition naturally showcased virtuosic printmaking. In this regard, the most recent works were the most impressive. Three dazzling codices, completed in 2021 at Magnolia Editions, feature layer upon layer of acrylic ink and varnish on amate (a pre-Columbian form of bark paper). Industrial meets

indigenous, as these pieces preserve the tactile quality of the amate while evoking the glossy sheen of a comic book. Nevertheless, the exhibition foregrounded Chagoya's message rather than his technical accomplishments and managed to distill his primary preoccupations in only ten works. Some were accompanied by the artist's own statements. These texts were free of the artspeak he satirizes, but also of the oblique references in his work—in them, he flatly condemns racism and xenophobia and warns viewers that systemic problems run deeper than any one president or pandemic.

Chagoya's frank remarks spared curator David Wells the need for didactic heavy lifting; the introductory text was largely biographical. However, the exhibition layout cleverly enacted Chagoya's strategy of reversal. Viewers circulated the intimate gallery counterclockwise and read the codices from right to left. In addition to directing the viewer through the space, displaying the full length of the accordion-folded codices (some nearly eight feet long) also allowed more than one viewer to comfortably take in the details. Some codices, like *The Waters of Oblivion in Mictlán* (2021) and *Procession: Tales of the Post-Conquest* (2021) functioned as panoramic

compositions even if their text could not be read from afar. *El Popol Vuh del la Abulita del Ahuizote* (2021), on the other hand, benefited from the closer, sequential reading offered in the exhibition, since it does not quite cohere compositionally from a distance. In either case, the atmospheric gestalt achieved by layer upon layer of ink, varnish, and historical references is as important to the work as the details that emerge at arm's length

If reading from different distances and directions proved disorienting, viewers had recourse to the codices' page numbers, which are rendered in the Mayan system rather than Arabic numerals. These signposts need no translation, which is more than can be said for the artspeak quoted throughout the codices and the earlier work, *Illegal Alien's Guide to Critical Theory* (2007). In Chagoya's reverse anthropology, it is critical theory that requires scrutiny, not Spanish or pre-Columbian pictographs. The jargon that typically signals insider status is made strange while Chagoya's multi-cultural verbal and visual vocabulary is made familiar with humor and pop relatable references.

It may be easy for an artist to poke fun at critics, but Chagoya is equally unsparing when it comes to art, especially the Western art historical canon. Though *El Popol*

Vuh de la Abuelita del Ahuizote is based on a specific Mayan codex, Chagoya reverses the usual patterns of representation and appropriation in art. *The Ghosts of Borderlandia* is conspicuously Surrealist, a desolate wallscape populated by fragmented figures. There, however, Chagoya breaks with tradition. The figures are pilfered not from Africa or the Pacific Islands but from Europe. Portraits by the likes of Botticelli and Picasso are violently cropped across the eyes, blinded by physical and metaphorical borders. In *Detention at the Border of Language* (2019), Chagoya borrows from art that predates avant-garde appropriation—the straightforwardly racist representations in Wimar’s painting *The Abduction of Boone’s Daughter by the Indians* (ca. 1853). With “Border Patrol” emblazoned on their canoe, the indigenous characters seem to be lawfully detaining rather than kidnapping Boone’s daughter, who has taken the form of Daisy Duck. Borders, identities, and fortunes are fluid.

Chagoya’s references to Wimar and Bingham make connections between contemporary border issues and the long colonial history of the United States. This was especially important for an exhibition in the Midwest, where the border may seem far away. In *The Pastoral or Arcadian State: Illegal Alien’s*

Guide to Greater America (2006) the boatmen from Bingham’s *Jolly Flatboatmen* (1846) are lifted from the Mississippi River and placed in a meadow scene by Bierstadt. The title speaks to the invention of America as a nation and its construction as a state, simultaneous projects driven by displacement and migration. Chagoya replaces Bingham’s original boatmen with a diverse cast of characters that demonstrate the many migrations that have shaped the United States since the time when the Mississippi River was the border, not the heartland.

This dialogue between the past and the present is another reversal. Just as comics and artists’ books echo medieval manuscripts and Mayan codices, Chagoya reminds the viewer that current events are anything but. His darkly humorous *The Seven Deadly Sins: Sheltering in Place* (2020) updates James Ensor’s 1904 satirical series on the same subject for the COVID-19 era. Chagoya combines timely references, like Black Lives Matter and Fox News, with images that recall not only Ensor’s modernism but also centuries of Christian art. Indeed, the skeleton that appears throughout the print cannot help but conjure a previous pandemic, the Black Death.

Chagoya’s playful reversals of time, as were evidenced in the

exhibition, are ultimately ambivalent. On the one hand, he celebrates cultural heritage and history. In *Travels of Fortune* (2021), a contemporary Mayan migrant is guided through a militarized border by mashed-up Mesoamerican comic heroes. The migrant girl's stories and traditions not only help her survive her journey but will also enrich the community where she eventually settles. On the other hand, we seem doomed to repeat the same mistakes. We fight wars and build walls; we make others into strangers and then fear them. Chagoya's art helps us learn from history so that we can break free from its destructive cycles.

What the SGCI conference got wrong is that printmaking doesn't *inherently* combat colonialism or challenge systems of oppression. In fact, Chagoya shows that art has long been complicit in these systems. It is by holding art and art history accountable—always with a sense of humor—that Chagoya successfully confronts racism, xenophobia, and violence.