

Entertainment

See this art: 'Between Bridges, Walls and Borders' at Mexic-Arte Museum

By Michael Barnes

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The roiling oranges and purples flare out across the wide museum space, momentarily obliterating all the other art in the room.

Despite the intensity of Pilo Pida's painting, "La Vida Entre Puentes, Muros y Fronteras (Life Between Bridges, Walls and Borders)," created in tandem with the El Paso-based Jellyfish Collective, the other entries in "Emerging Latinx Artists 25" easily hold our attention on their own.

Formerly known as "Young Latino Artists," this venerable series of shows staged annually by Mexic-Arte Museum is a powerhouse every year. Even more so this time around, because curator George Vargas has selected art from veterans of the previous shows.

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Before spending more time on the fierce triptych, let's look at a few other highlights from this show that is more formally titled "ELA 25: Intersección: Coque & Alvivio (Intersection: Shock & Relief Exhibition)."

I spent a good deal of time with Jose Villalobos' installed objects executed in various mediums that explicitly and artfully tackle the nuances of toxic masculinity through fringed hats, a bejeweled saddle, rough rope, barbed wire, a recorded ritual burial and eerily broken-off hands and feet attached to the whole by ropes and gear.

Yareth Fernández González's "Tesoros Nacionales" combines yarn, map pins, ribbons and what look like disassembled architectural forms to kindle thoughts on the links that are made or broken in the environment by border walls.

I liked Hope Mora's photographs of the working people of the West Texas town of Pecos that are both exacting and uncanny, as well as Michael Anthony García's oilcloth-based pyramid — or tree? — of fabric-covered blocks attached to T-shirts adorned with slogan-like poetry in English and Spanish.

Back to "La Vida."

While the oranges of the sky and various forms of water first command our attention, the purples of the multiple bridges, the hardened river channel, a high wall to the left and other structures on the right bring the solid details into focus. We know right away that the bridges link Ciudad Juarez in Mexico and El Paso in the U.S. And because of the placement of the flags, we can safely guess that we are facing roughly east toward an illuminated sky at dawn.

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Yet a third element invites an even closer look. In that brilliant sky, one sees flattened images: a knife, a skull, a fireball, a rain cloud, raindrops, stars and an eye, along with other signs and symbols. Also words, some of hope, some of despair, in Spanish and English: "vida," "orden," "control," "futuro," "poder."

Ultimately, the target-like sun on the horizon sets a final tone of beauty and hope, at least for this viewer.

Seen in Austin, more than 500 miles away, all these words and images likely take on different meanings than they might for the Jellyfish Collective. For one, Austinites are not accustomed to thinking of Ciudad Juarez and El Paso as two faces of one city with a metro population of more than 2.5 million, larger than Austin's (2.2 million) and more closely matched to San Antonio's (2.5 million).

A big barrier also divides our city — Austin's in the form of a freeway that historically divided its people by race — but passage between East Austin and West Austin is not controlled by brute military force, and our river has not been harshly imprisoned in a concrete trough.

"ELA 25: Intersección: Coque & Alivio (Intersection: Shock & Relief Exhibition)" runs through Nov. 22 at Mexic-Arte Museum, 419 Congress Ave. For more info: mexic-artemuseum.org, 512-200-7278.