

THE OTHER SIDE

**Chinese and Mexican
Immigration to America**

MARCH 28 – JULY 19, 2015





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From 1882 to 1943, the United States Congress enacted and enforced a series of laws known as the Chinese Exclusion Act, prohibiting people of Chinese ancestry from becoming naturalized U.S. citizens. In 2012, a formal apology was issued by Congress to the people harmed by the Act. Only four other measures of this kind have been approved by Congress. They dealt with the internment of Japanese-Americans, the colonial annexation of Hawai'i, the violations of Native American sovereignty, and the enslavement of Africans and African-Americans. This unusual gesture of legislative contrition in 2012 suggests the importance of admitting and examining the traumas of our nation's immigrant history and became the catalyst for the exhibition, *The Other Side: Chinese and Mexican Immigration to America*.

The Chinese Exclusion Act and Mexican Immigration

After the Gold Rush of 1849, Chinese workers streamed into the United States, finding work in the mines and on the transcontinental railroad. As their numbers grew, government agencies, civic leaders, labor unions, and nativist citizens feared the "corrupting" effects of the Chinese on the moral, cultural, and economic

underpinnings of Euro-American society, which considered itself mainstream. By the 1880s, this led to the first of several legislative acts that would severely restrict the immigration and naturalization of the Chinese and influenced future prohibitions on large-scale immigration into the U.S. This was the first law to restrict ethnicity-specific immigration to the United States, and it served as a template for later acts.

In the nineteenth century, the U.S. federal government saw the influx of Chinese workers as a danger to local economies and employment. The Chinese Exclusion Act permitted Chinese laborers who were already in the U.S. before November 17, 1880 to travel abroad and return, but prohibited any new immigrants from coming into the country. A few were exempt from the Act: students, teachers, travelers, and merchants. However, many Chinese found it difficult to prove they were not laborers, and therefore, few entered the United States after 1882.

The Act expired in 1892 but was quickly extended for another ten years pursuant to the Geary Act, which also added further requirements for Chinese residents. When the Geary Act was set to expire in 1902, Congress made the law permanent and added more restrictions forcing Chinese residents to obtain a certificate of residency or



face deportation. In the 1920s Congress adopted broader quotas and national origin requirements in response to an increase in post-World War I immigration. In 1929, the National Origins Act was created to replace previous laws. It set a limit of 150,000 immigrants annually but barred those from Asian countries. The Magnuson Act in 1943 replaced the National Origins Act and all other exclusion acts, but allowed only 105 Chinese immigrants per year, continuing the drastic restriction. Consistent with the advocacy for comprehensive civil rights in the 1960s, the Immigration and Nationality Act of 1965 raised the overall limit to 170,000 per year with a maximum of 20,000 immigrants from any one country including Asian countries. After almost eighty years, larger numbers of Chinese people were finally allowed into the United States.

As a concession of the 1848 Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo, which ended the Mexican-American War, the United States was ceded a large amount of territory, in what is now California, Arizona, Colorado, New Mexico, Utah, Nevada, and parts of Wyoming and Montana.

Mexicans living in that area prior to the treaty were offered U.S. citizenship, but their personal and property rights as citizens were routinely trampled upon. Prior to the 1920s, Mexicans were exempt from U.S. immigration laws and were admitted as guest workers during World War I. Catalyzed by the revolution in Mexico and a growing U.S. economy, Mexican immigration to the U.S. surged to 600,000 between 1910-1930. Echoing the earlier fears directed towards Chinese immigrants, many Americans felt that Mexicans would “corrupt” American cultural values and threaten the livelihood of white American workers. However, with so many Mexicans already living among them, Americans used aggressive ideological strategies to Americanize young Mexicans through educational and social programs.

Once the Great Depression hit, resident Mexicans were scapegoated for economic reasons. Hundreds of thousands of immigrants, along with their U.S.-born children, were sent back to Mexico in the 1930s. However, with the advent of World War II, the need for low wage labor to increase agricultural production led

to a turnaround in official U.S. policy. From 1942, over four million temporary work visas were issued to field workers recruited through the cooperative, bi-national Bracero Program. This second surge of immigration did not last as the U.S. again changed its attitude as the need for labor diminished in the late 1950s and 1960s. More than four million immigrants, and many U.S. citizens as well, were sent back to Mexico. Yet the pattern of U.S.-Mexican economic interdependence was irreversible: the U.S. demand for low cost manual labor was met by an equal need for jobs among poor and working-class Mexicans, which led to a continuous northward migration that is the largest transnational stream in the world. The present wave of immigration includes more than twenty million people of Mexican origin living in the United States.

The influence and legacy of Chinese immigrant restrictions in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries had parallel consequences for Mexican immigrants: a series of immigration acts in the twentieth century imposed numeric limits on

immigration to the U.S. This prohibited unskilled workers from being issued work visas, dealing a particular blow to Mexican immigrants, who were overwhelmingly manual laborers. As a result, a volume of undocumented Mexican immigration steadily increased. The Immigration Reform and Control Act of 1986 was passed by Congress in a bid to definitively address illegal immigration to the United States. Congress has passed additional laws to control border enforcement and migration after the September 11 attacks in 2001. Homeland Security initiatives have dramatically raised the bar and the budget on border enforcement and immigration control. The current rancorous debates in Congress over immigration reform reflect the exacerbation of this issue in recent years.

previous spread: Hung Liu, *China Mary, Wyoming 2*, 2006, Oil on canvas, Courtesy of the artist and Walter Maciel Gallery, Los Angeles

above: Zhi Lin, *elev. 0 ft. Pacific Ocean, S.S. Alaska, Pacific Mail Steamship Co, 1867, Building of the Central Pacific by Chinese Workers*, 2015, Chinese ink and colors on Chinese paper, Courtesy of the artist and Koplin Del Rio Gallery, Culver City, CA

Artists' Responses to Immigration to the U.S.

In trying to represent the effects of the exclusionary programs of American immigration, the six artists in the exhibition, Andrea Bowers, Margarita Cabrera, Tony de los Reyes, Blane De St. Croix, Zhi Lin, and Hung Liu, visually recount some of the personal stories and hardships experienced by Chinese and Mexican immigrants.

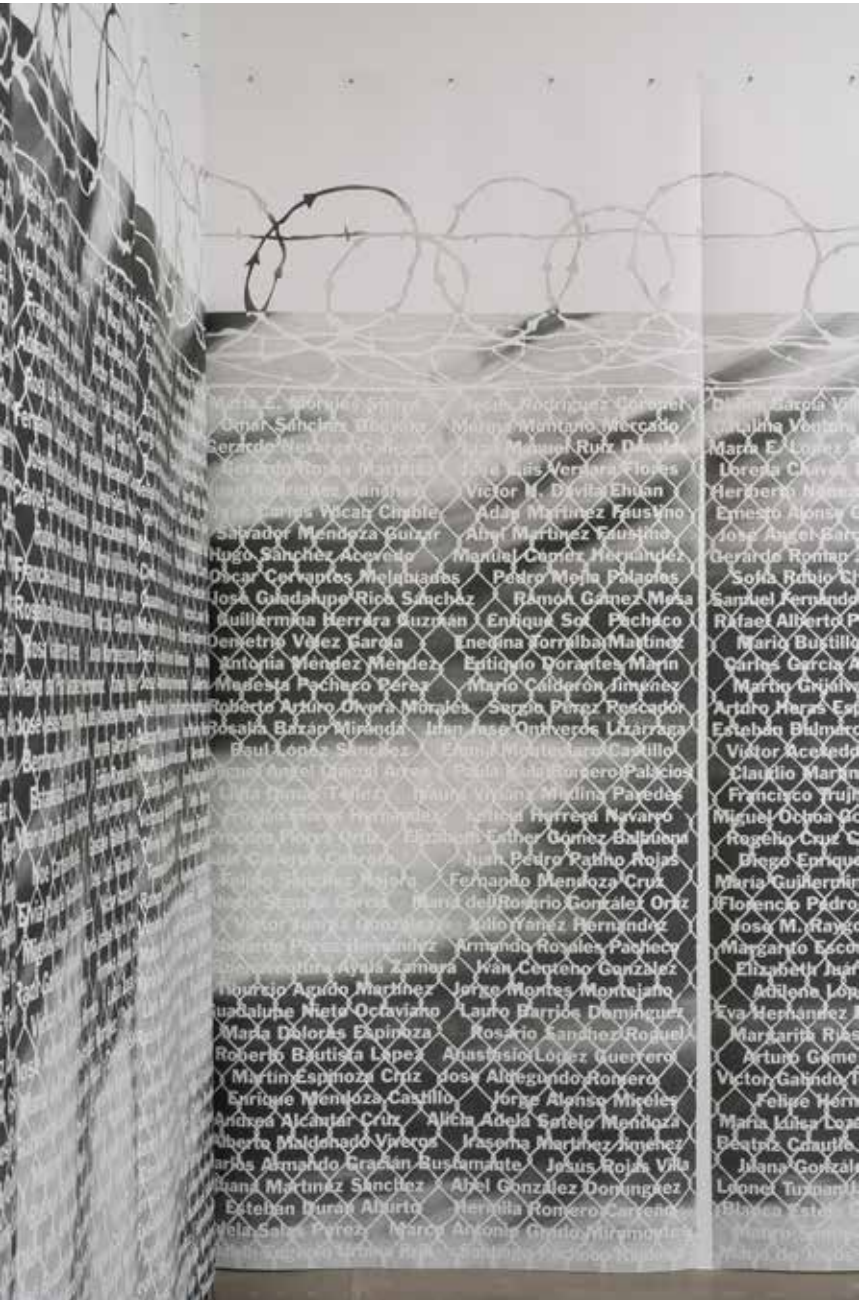
While most of the Chinese immigrants to the U.S. in the nineteenth century were men, women also made the journey to live in Gum Shan, or Gold Mountain—as North America (particularly California) was known. Hung Liu’s paintings celebrate the lives of two of these women, Polly Bemis and “China Mary.” Born in Taishan, Guangdong, China, Polly Bemis (1853-1933) was sold by her father to become a concubine for a wealthy Chinese man in Idaho. After his death, she married Charles Bemis in 1894, later living alone as a widow on a tiny homestead near the Salmon River. From her humble beginnings, Polly overcame tremendous odds to become a respected and beloved member of the pioneer community. Less is known about the early life of “China Mary,” or Ah Yuen, but she is believed to have lived from 1848-1939, with much of her adult life being spent in Evanston, Wyoming.

Hung Liu’s dripping paint in these portraits suggests the passage of time, and embedded images such as bird, flower, and bat motifs refer to Chinese visual culture, as well as the adversities these women went through in the “New World.” Her large-scale installation *Jiu Jin Shan (Old Gold Mountain)* exposes the poignant quest for increased economic opportunities and better lives shared by those coming to America from China to work on the transcontinental railroad, as the tracks of the installation disappear under a golden mountain of empty

fortune cookies. Liu was born in Changchun, China, and graduated from the Central Academy of Fine Art in Beijing. She emigrated from China to the U.S. in 1984 to attend the University of California, San Diego, where she received an MFA. She currently lives in Oakland and is Professor Emerita in the art department at Mills College.

Zhi Lin’s extensive research into the history and experiences of Chinese workers completing the transcontinental railroad is embodied in his multimedia work in this exhibition. The video captures the exclusion of the Chinese at the moment of greatest potential pride, when the Golden Spike was driven in to connect the two railroads. In contrast to his realistic and representational works that memorialize Chinese railroad workers, Lin’s abstract landscapes featured in this exhibition express the natural beauty of America that the workers witnessed along their journeys. Underlying this beauty, however, one can still feel the pain and suffering of the Chinese laborers: the striking landscapes, embodying a quiet abstract quality, gently guide the viewer to the experience of the Chinese laborer who endured hardship without proper recognition. Lin was born in Nanjing, China, and graduated from the China National Academy of Fine Art. In 1987, he attended the Slade School of Fine Art at University College, London, where he later completed his MFA. Lin is the Chair, Division of Art, and the Floyd and Delores Jones Endowed Professor in the Arts at the University of Washington, Seattle.

opposite: Andrea Bowers, *No Olvidado (Not Forgotten)*, no. 10, 2010, Graphite on paper, Loaned by Homeira and Arnold Goldstein, Image Robert Wedemeyer, Courtesy of Susanne Vielmetter Los Angeles Projects





opposite: Margarita Cabrera, *Space in Between – Nopal*, 2010,
In collaboration with Candelaria Cabrera,
Border Patrol uniform fabric, copper wire, thread, terra cotta pot,
Courtesy of the artist, Image Fredrik Nilsen

below: Tony de los Reyes, *Border Theory (indeterminate zone/black)*, 2013,
Dye and oil on linen, Courtesy of the artist

In her monumental drawing series *No Olvidado (Not Forgotten)*, Andrea Bowers has created a memorial honoring those who have died crossing the U.S.-Mexico border. Unlike many memorials, this is an incomplete list and will always remain so no matter how many names are added. In contrast to the contentious political issues referenced by the drawings, Bowers delicately articulates each panel with gentle touches of graphite powder, a reminder of the fragility of human existence. She was born in Wilmington, Ohio and received her BFA from Bowling Green State University and her MFA from California Institute of the Arts. Bowers currently lives and works in Los Angeles.

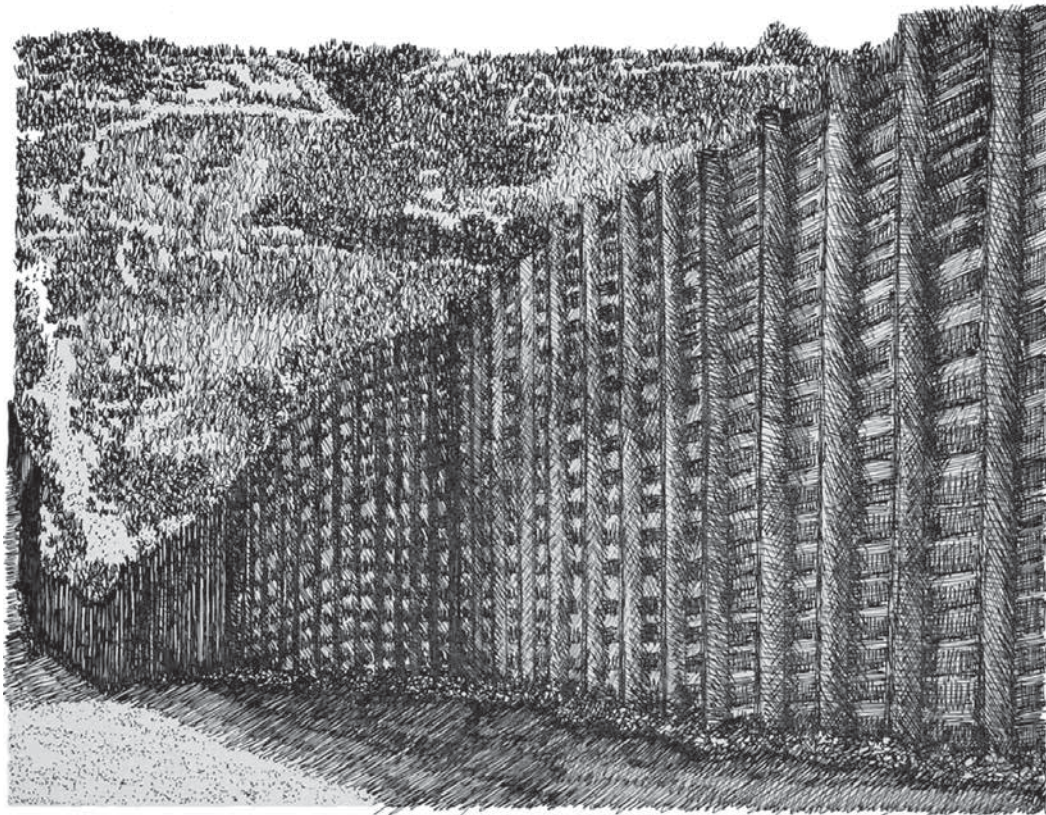
In Margarita Cabrera's soft sculpture series of desert plants in terra cotta pots, she uses Border Patrol uniforms to form the plants, leaving threads exposed to serve as a

reminder of the labor involved in manufacturing, while referencing the plants' natural defenses in the form of spines. Cabrera collaborated with workers who had crossed the border, making it possible for them to stitch their personal immigration experiences onto the plants. The plants and uniforms in this elegant hybrid formation create a marriage between something beautifully organic and uninhibited in growth, with something that is powerfully controlled, and restrictive. Margarita Cabrera was born in Monterrey, Mexico and received her BFA in Sculpture and MFA in Combined Media from Hunter College of the City University of New York. She currently lives and works in El Paso, Texas.

Since 2012, Tony de los Reyes has developed his *Border Theory* series, combining the attributes and implications of abstract painting with the demarcation between the



Blane De St. Croix, *U.S./Mexico Border No. 9*, 2009, Ink on paper,
Courtesy of the artist



United States and Mexico. De los Reyes addresses the border, the Rio Grande (termed “Rio Bravo” in Mexico), as a site of abstracted politics, which, like painting, utilizes specific processes and ideologies to organize otherwise incoherent spaces. These paintings are not maps, but abstractions of maps that take into account the foremost elements of polarity inherent in the border, namely the push-pull of attraction and repulsion. By definition, alternate “sides,” like magnets, create tension through a unique kind of interference. In *Border Theory (indeterminate zone/black)*, it is possible to imagine the border as a site of transference, with the linearity of the vertical marks pushing against, over, and through a zone of neutrality as shown in the raw linen. Born and raised in Los Angeles, Tony de los Reyes received his BFA from California State University, Northridge, and his MFA from San Francisco Art Institute. He lives and works in Los Angeles.

Blane De St. Croix’s artwork investigates the geopolitical, social, and cultural strife in many parts of the world, and from 2009 to 2011, he created artworks addressing the U.S.-Mexico border. With meticulous attention to detail, he recreated long stretches of the border in three dimensions. His realistic depiction of the fence shatters the illusion of an impermeable border, bringing into stark focus its *de facto* porosity. De St. Croix travelled over 3,000 miles of the border and stopped at numerous border crossings, conducting interviews with individuals he encountered as he went. In the *US/Mexico Border* drawing series, he documented his journey through photographs, and once back in his studio, translated these images to drawings that incorporated the fence as part of the natural landscape. In his sculpture *Two Ends*, De St. Croix has recreated both ends of the border in California and Texas, where it terminates as land meets sea. De St. Croix received an MFA in Sculpture at Cranbrook Academy of Art, and is

Associate Professor and Head of Sculpture at Indiana University. He lives and works in New York City and Bloomington, Indiana.

Shared suffering of individuals searching for better lives, including the deaths of Chinese railroad workers and migrants crossing the border to the U.S., draws these artists together, albeit in distinct experiences. In both cultures, the United States has been idealized as the land where gold lines the streets. Enduring poverty and the scarcity of jobs in their countries, immigrants dream of better lives for themselves and their families—dreams that drive them to risk everything. The title of the exhibition comes from the reference in Latin American communities to the U.S. as *El Otro Lado*—the other side. While one may think of the euphemism of “the grass is greener on the other side,” one also cannot help but feel the ominous overtones of death, or passing to the other side.

—*Chip Tom, guest co-curator*

Exhibition Related Programs

Friday, March 27, 6:30 - 9:30 pm

Night Market & Exhibition Opening

This vibrant night of food, arts, and crafts sponsored by American First National Bank offers a free first-look at the art.

Saturday, April 25, 12:00 pm

Creation Station: Ancestor Quest

Explore identity and ancestry through themed art projects and engaging tours of the gallery.

Friday, May 1, 6:00 pm

Authors & Asia: (Re) Imagining America

This presentation by Dr. Shelley Fisher Fishkin and Dr. Stephen Klineberg explores Chinese and Mexican American immigrants' creative re-imagining of place and history in their new country.

In collaboration with Kinder Institute for Urban Research

Sunday, May 3, 2:00 pm

Artists Talk: Margarita Cabrera,

Tony de los Reyes, Zhi Lin, and Hung Liu

Four artists featured in the exhibition will discuss their work and personal histories.

Thursday, May 7, 6:00 pm

Young Professionals: Asian Pacific American Heritage Month and Cinco de Mayo Leo Bar

Celebrate these cultures with cuisine, cocktails, and creativity.

Tuesday, May 12, 7:00 pm

Panel Discussion: Immigration Then and Now

The speakers will address the challenges of immigration in both contemporary and historical contexts.

Saturday, June 6, 1:00 pm

Creation Station: Chinese and Mexican Cultures

Celebrate cultures featured in the exhibition through storytelling and visual art projects.

Saturday, June 6, 7:30 pm

Asia Society Presents! One Song: Chinese and Mexican Music of Home

Houston artists Summer Haiyan Song and Vanessa Alonzo present traditional music from China and Mexico.

Presenting Sponsor: Bank of America

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#OtherSide

cover: Zhi Lin, "Chinaman's Chance" on Promontory Summit: Golden Spike Celebration, 12:30 PM, 10th May 1869 (detail), 2015, HD video projection on painting (charcoal/oil on canvas), Courtesy of the artist and Koplin Del Rio Gallery, Culver City, CA

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CELEBRATING
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