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Artist Jackie Amézquita and the wailings of the land

Launched in 2020 as her MFA thesis at UCLA, Guatemalan-born artist Jackie Amézquita's "Gemidos de la Tierra" — "Wailings of the Land/Soil" — is a stark, multipanel memorial honoring immigrants who have died in the custody of ICE (U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement) since the agency's inception in 2003.

In March of 2023, Amézquita performed her first "Gemidos" public activation and procession, updating the work with more names and displaying the tall panels on pickup trucks navigating Los Angeles streets steeped in Central American diaspora. A second activation and procession took place earlier this year, also in Los Angeles. The memorial is now on view for the first time at a museum — the Art, Design & Architecture Museum at UC Santa Barbara.

The work's third public activation begins at 3 p.m. on Día de los Muertos (Sunday, Nov. 1) on the UCSB campus. Amézquita will add 57 names, expanding the work to 15 panels and the number of the deceased to 298. With soil from the region where the person died, Amézquita handcasts each name with masa, salt and rainwater, a technique both devotionally elemental and politically charged. From a viewpoint of the living, the growing monument reflects the casualties of our own system.

Ahead of the event, The Current caught up with Amézquita for more on her background, influences and details about the activation.

In a sense, the roots of “Gemidos de la Tierra” date back to 2014 when you were trying to locate a detained family member, correct?

Jackie Amézquita: It was my sibling, who was seeking asylum. I was eventually able to locate them in detention, where they remained for approximately nine months before being granted asylum. While searching for my sibling, I encountered a list of people who had died in ICE custody. That discovery stayed with me and eventually became the foundation for “Gemidos de la Tierra.”

The uncertainty of searching for someone you love, and knowing that other families never received the news they hoped for, continues to shape my relationship to this work.

Before “Gemidos,” what was your background in sculpture and how do you identify as an artist?

I consider myself a multimedia artist. Sculpture is an important part of my practice, alongside performance, installation, textiles and painting. Before UCLA, I studied fine art at ArtCenter College of Design and was already developing work through weaving, performance, and the relationship between the body and the land. These approaches continue to inform how I think about sculptural form.

Geography, movement and the optics of space also influence my practice. I am interested in how places are seen and experienced, how bodies move through them, and how the perception of a body changes across geographies. These questions shape how I work with material and presence, and how I understand the relationships between land, visibility and belonging.

Who have been important influences?

Andy Goldsworthy is an important influence. I am drawn to his sensitivity to natural materials and to time, change and impermanence. In my own practice, I approach materials as collaborators, attentive to what they carry and how they transform.

My own experience of migration and the experiences of my mother, grandmother and sibling have profoundly shaped my practice. These histories inform my relationship to materials, memory, and the body.

During Sunday’s activation you won’t be working alone. Who will join you?

I think of the people who join me as collaborators, allies and disruptors. Together, we sustain a shared space of remembrance and carry the physical and emotional weight of the work. That weight cannot be carried alone. Their presence, attention and care are integral to the activation.

Our repetitive actions form a choreography through which we accompany one another, share the labor of remembrance and make collective care visible. These gestures interrupt the silence and erasure surrounding these lives, insisting that each name deserves time, attention and a place in public memory.

Micaela Tobin (Filipino-American composer and sound artist) is also activating the work through sound. Her contribution extends this shared space of remembrance, bringing listening into relation with our movements and the names being held. Together, sound, gesture, material and presence sustain a collective act of mourning and renewal.

Including the names to be added on November 1, how many countries are represented? What demographics or statistics have stood out for you?

With the November 1 additions, the memorial will represent ten countries: Mexico, Guatemala, Honduras, Nicaragua, El Salvador, Cuba, China, Ghana, Haiti, and the Czech Republic.

What has stayed with me is both the breadth of these geographies and the gaps in the records. Early in the process, I encountered accounts of children’s deaths that were absent from the official lists I was consulting (from the Department of Homeland Security, ICE’s parent agency).

I will add 57 names, including that of a two-year-old child. As a mother, that carries a particular weight. Each name belongs to a person whose life extended far beyond the circumstances of their death. I think of their relationships, their memories, and the future they should have been able to live.

What is the significance of performing the activation in public?

Performing the activation in public creates a space where remembrance becomes a shared responsibility. People can witness the time, labor and care involved in giving each name a physical presence. They can listen, mourn and accompany the process. Bringing these names into public space asks us to acknowledge lives that have been

marginalized and to consider our responsibility to one another. The gathering itself becomes part of the memorial: a place where conversation, shared actions and remembrance make room for grief.

Anything you would like to add?

I hope there will come a time when I no longer need to add names to “Gemidos de la Tierra.” Each addition carries the weight of another life lost and another family living with that absence.

The material form is central to the work’s intention. Each name is hand-cast using soil from the state where the person died, combined with masa, salt and rainwater. Placed together on panels, the names take on a physical presence that asks us to pause and acknowledge each life. The earth becomes a holder of memory, and the labor of forming each letter becomes an act of care. My intention is to create a place where remembrance takes material form and grief can be held collectively.

Until then, I will continue making space for these names to be held and remembered. I am grateful to the collaborators and communities who help sustain that responsibility. Renewal, for me, lives in our capacity to keep caring for one another while carrying the memory of those who are no longer here.

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Starting at 11 a.m. on Monday, Nov. 2, in the museum, Amézquita will join UCSB faculty Omar Pimienta (Department of Spanish and Portuguese), Priscilla Ybarra (Chicana and Chicano studies) and Alicia Boswell (history of art and architecture) to discuss the work and activation event.

“Jackie Amézquita: Gemidos de la Tierra” continues at the Art, Design & Architecture Museum at UC Santa Barbara through November 29, curated by Ana Briz, the museum’s assistant director and curator of exhibitions.

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