

LESSON 19: MEMORIALS AND TRANSCENDENCE

El Arbol de la Muerte, Mexico

Fig. 4.1

Veronica Castillo Hernández (Izúcar de Matamoros, Puebla, Mexico, 1967-). *El Arbol de la Muerte: Maquilando Mujeres*, 2003. Ceramic, paint, wire. Fowler Museum at UCLA. Gift of Thomas Wortham. X2004.20.1.

Unit 4

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Lesson Summary and Objectives

Students use a work of art to explore an ongoing and tragic series of events in Juárez, Mexico. They research and write about the “*maquiladora* murders” and use the idiom of the Tree of Life to express their feelings about this and other community issues. Activities also center on students’ study of the Tree of Life and suggestions are given for their making of trees that reflect themes significant to the students themselves. Students will:

- Use the imagery on a tree of death by ceramicist Veronica Castillo as a means to explore the *maquiladora* murders in Juarez, Mexico.
- Research and write about the *maquiladora* murders and concerns in their own community.
- Study the Mexican tradition of the Tree of Life and create a work inspired by the tradition.

Background Information

The ceramic Tree of Life is a Mexican popular art tradition that embodies centuries of accumulated symbolism. Trees, sometimes with death imagery, may be placed on Day of the Dead altars to memorialize loved ones. In *El Arbol de la Muerte: Maquilando Mujeres (Tree of Death: Factory Women)* (Fig. 4.1), Veronica Castillo Hernández created a visual elegy for more than 400 young women and girls who have been brutally murdered since 1993 in the Mexican border town Ciudad Juárez near El Paso, Texas. Sadly, the U.S. and other foreign-owned border factories and the press have done little to investigate these crimes, and today the murders continue and remain unsolved. Castillo Hernández’s work is a poignant reminder of the violence that has devastated a community and a moving tribute to the innocent victims of these heinous crimes. It also demonstrates the power of popular art to expand beyond its traditional meanings and to bring public attention to a tragedy.

About the Artist

Veronica Castillo Hernández is a member of a well-known family of ceramicists from Izúcar de Matamoros, Mexico. The Castillo family is especially known for the diversity of their Tree of Life candelabras. As a young child Veronica joined in the family projects modeling small figurines for use in her parents’ art pieces. The work of the Castillo Hernández family has been increasingly recognized and appreciated, and so has the output of Veronica Castillo Hernández. She conceptualized the memorial altar shown here while an artist-in-residence at MujerArtes in San Antonio, Texas.

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Curriculum Connections

1. Coming to Terms with Tragedy

Over 400 women and girls who have been killed were employed as workers at the U.S. and other foreign-owned border factories around Ciudad Juárez. Little attention—local, national, or international—was paid to these murders until about 2001. Amnesty International, who called them “crimes against humanity,” increased public awareness and outrage, and recently the government of Mexico sent 300 federal agents to Juárez to bolster the local police force. In 2003 the UCLA Chicano Studies Research Center, in co-sponsorship with Amnesty International, hosted an international conference on the Juárez crimes. Scholars, activists, artists, journalists, students, and policy specialists from the U.S. and Mexico, as well as families of the victims, came together to discuss the crimes and their consequences in regard to U.S.-Mexico border policies.

Activity

Let students consider the groups affected by the events in Juárez. These may include the victims and their families, factory owners, the press, local police, other law enforcement, the educational system, transnational corporations, the government, and perhaps others. Students could debate the roles played and the interconnectedness of the individuals and groups involved. Besides the murderers, who else might bear responsibilities? What could have been done to prevent such continued atrocities? Who should play a part in ending and remediating the situation?

Certainly more information is necessary to better understand the issues. A search of the Internet (keywords: *maquiladora* murders) will lead to many sites. Some accounts of the situation include upsetting, and even grisly, details so teachers might want to monitor the sites they recommend for students’ research. Some points to note that are pertinent to the student discussions include: Since the signing of the North America Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) many multinational corporations for production-line assembly operations have built factories in Mexican cities, including Ciudad Juárez. NAFTA regulates some laws affecting the *maquiladoras*. In Juárez the factories employ mostly women in sweatshop conditions for long hours at very low pay. More *maquiladora* workers live in Juárez than in any other Mexican city. Many have been kidnapped while traveling to and from work. Sometimes last-minute changes in shift hours mean that women travel alone. Note also that the murders don’t happen on company property.

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2. A Tree Grows in the Classroom—Ephemeral and Noteworthy

Activity

Students aware of world conditions will undoubtedly have opinions about many of them. They will surely agree on the magnitude of the horrific *maquiladora* murders. But what other situations in the world do they feel are calling for attention? Using Post-it notes and newspaper clippings, students will fill a tree with references and thoughts about situations calling today for individual and world attention. (Subjects may include Darfur, HIV-AIDS, homelessness, poverty, corruption, and international violence.)

Draw the outline of a large many-branched tree, either on the chalkboard or on sheets of paper attached to the wall. As students discuss, write about, and/or research current happenings in their community and beyond, let them name the situation on a Post-it that they will place on a tree branch. These can be augmented with relevant news clippings, artwork, and student stories or poetry. Many and varied approaches are possible. You could color-code the notes with those deemed primarily political, social, economic, religious, or ecological, or consider possibilities for grouping them as to students' ability to bring about mediation. Students may also join with others to become more actively involved in issues of concern to them.

3. Traditional Trees of Life

The Tree of Life is an archetype that appears in art and literature throughout the world and has been a recurring motif in Mexican visual culture for centuries. Contemporary trees embody aspects of ancient indigenous traditions such as those of the Maya, Mixtec, and Aztec cultures and the traditions of European Catholicism, yet also reflect artists' values and responses to changes brought on by tourism, global trade, and mass media. They remain powerful symbols of Mexico's history as artists elaborate and enrich the ceramic candelabra-like trees with bright colors and patterns, foliage, human figures, and animals (**Handout MEXICAN TREES OF LIFE**).

Activity

A survey of Trees of Life would show the students the variety displayed in the genre. Subject matter, form, colors, embellishments, and themes are all rich avenues of study.

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Activity (cont.)

A Tree of Life may be placed on an altar constructed in the memory of a loved one. Students can follow this tradition, either to honor someone's memory or as a sign of respect for a living person. Although the traditional Tree of Life is made of clay, students can also construct one of papier mâché or of wood or found objects, or could draw or paint a two-dimensional tree. In the branches they should place mementos, photographs and/or references to the person being honored by the tree. It is important to share photographs of Mexican Trees of Life with the students before beginning this activity.

4. The Tree of Death—*El Arbol de la Muerte*

Activity

El Arbol de la Muerte is at once unlike, and yet closely related to the traditional Trees of Life discussed above. Elements in common are the many arched branches, bright colors on the outer tree limbs, flowers, skulls, and other skeletal imagery. Less typical, of course is the story told by the structure and the elements hanging from the tree. Students should look to see how the artist alluded to the many victims of the *maquiladora* murders.

Of note: the base (roots) of the tree portrays a factory and its trunk is a smoke-stack. The factory building bears the names of corporations who employ women in their Juárez-area factories or *maquiladores*: RCA, Sony, Phillips, GE, Hitachi, Acer, Toshiba, and others. Crosses commemorate *mujeres de Juárez* (women of Juárez) and *mujeres del mundo* (women of the world). Suspended from branches are coats, dresses, and shoes, referencing both the frequent products of the factories and the items taken from the victims and hastily strewn in the desert. Also hanging are body parts including hands, feet, and legs, testament to the mutilation of the victims. Some male figures are identified with the names of Dracula, el Diablo (the Devil), El Egipcio (the Egyptian), and Tolteco. Bloodied knives are seen in the hands of these villains.

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Useful Readings

Dillon, Sam

1998 "Rape and Murder Stalk Women in Northern Mexico."
The New York Times (April 18). <<http://query.nytimes.com/gst/fullpage.html>>
(accessed October 24, 2007)

Márguez, Letisia

2003 "Probing the Maquiladora Murders." *UCLA Today* (April 22).
<http://www.today.ucla.edu/2003/030422_maquiladora.html>
(accessed October 24, 2007)

Mulryan, Lenore Hoag

2003 *Ceramic Trees of Life: Popular Art from Mexico*.
Los Angeles: UCLA Fowler Museum of Cultural History.

WOLA and Latin America Working Group

2007 "Crying for Justice: Murders of Women in Ciudad Juárez, Mexico."
Washington Office on Latin America (March 2005). <www.wola.org>
(accessed October 24, 2007)

Photograph Captions

Handout MEXICAN TREES OF LIFE

A. Heriberto Ortega. Tree of Life. Metepec, Mexico. 1967. Ceramic, paint, metal. H: 91.4 cm. Fowler Museum at UCLA. X97.44.47

B. Alfonso Castillo family. Tree of Life. Izúcar de Matamoros. Circa 1985. Ceramic, paint, metal. H: 56 cm. Fowler Museum at UCLA. Gift of Peggy Byrnes. X85.466

C. Heriberto Castillo. Tree of Life. Izúcar de Matamoros. 1973. Ceramic, paint, metal. H: 45.1 cm. Fowler Museum at UCLA. The Gerald Daniel Collection of Mexican Folk Art, donated by the Daniel Family. X97.44.8

D. Herón Martínez. Tree of Life. Acatlán, Mexico. 1972. Ceramic, paint, metal. H: 64.3 cm. Fowler Museum at UCLA. X97.44.54

A graphic for Unit 4. It features a dark brown square with a white border. Inside the square, the word "Unit" is written in a white, serif font, and the number "4" is written in a large, white, sans-serif font. The square is set against a background of a repeating pattern of small, light brown diamonds.

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Note to Teachers:

This lesson is part of the curricular materials developed to accompany the exhibition ***Intersections: World Arts, Local Lives***. Although this and companion lessons are self-contained, each will be enhanced when used in conjunction with others in this resource. Addressing several lessons within each unit will facilitate the incorporation of the study of world arts and cultures into your curriculum.

The lesson is based on works in the last section of the exhibition called *Art and Transformation*. In this gallery works are introduced that served to make things happen. See “Unit Four—Art and Transformation” for an introductory statement on the unit, along with some provocative “Questions for Thought,” and suggestions that will inspire the students to relate the unit to their own lives.

Images of objects to be shown to students may be printed as handouts (from within each lesson), viewed online at the ***Intersections*** web link <http://collections.fowler.ucla.edu>, or downloaded from the curriculum page on our website.

In this unit the topics and lessons are

Lesson 19: Memorials and Transcendence: *El Arbol de la Muerte, Mexico*

Lesson 20: Arts for Spiritual Intervention: To Seek Divine Assistance: *Emas, Japan*

Lesson 21: Arts for Spiritual Intervention: Honoring Patron Saints with *Retablos, Mexico*

Lesson 22: Tradition as Innovation: *Apartheid's Funeral, South Africa*

Lesson 23: Tradition as Innovation: *La Calavera don Quijote, Mexico*



A



B



C



D

