

Potent border show tears down barriers

ART REVIEW / *With their site-specific works scattered across the Tijuana and San Diego region, the 44 artists of Insite 97 — including five Canadians — explore frontiers of every kind.*

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HIGH on a dusty, rubble-strewn hilltop in Colonia Libertad, a Mexican town huddled tight up against the United States, something has landed.

Amid the used tires, broken bottles and crumpled tin cans, an ancient Ford seems to have cleared the border — just a few paces behind it — and fallen to earth. Its chassis is covered with elaborate hand-painted flowers and vines; the windows are filled with tightly packed pink sweetheart roses, now dried by the sun.

No folksy shrine, this meticulously orchestrated intrusion into the fabric of village life is a work of art, crafted by Mexico City's Betsabee Romero as her contribution to Insite 97, a show on until Nov. 30 at locations across the San Diego-Tijuana region.

Billed as "new projects in public spaces by artists of the Americas," the exhibition, organized by a coalition of cultural organizations on both sides of the border, is a place where two worlds dramatically collide.

Four curators from Canada, the U.S., Mexico and Brazil (respectively Jessica Bradley, Sally Yard, Olivier Debroise and Ivo Mesquita) worked together to choose 44 artists, each of whom undertook to visit the area and to produce work out of the experience.

Romero's piece, for instance, is a feminist rejoinder to the local Low Rider tradition — to the macho car that, with its satanic imagery, its religious fanaticism and its eroticization of violence and apocalypse, makes the man. But Romero's female version invokes the Virgin of Guadalupe — a kind of patron saint of Mexico's downtrodden. Where she has been, legend has it, roses will be found, and with them, hope.

The southern sojourns of two Canadian artists inspired them to produce photography that builds dialogue across the border.

Vancouver's Liz Magor — helped by Canadian photographer Henri Robideau — took 300 portraits of students in two San Diego and Tijuana high

schools. Mixed up and then installed in groups throughout the two cities, the pictures became a melancholy exploration of anonymity and displacement.

For a further twist, Magor worked with a 19th-century cyanotype process that uses available light to make the images appear. Some of Magor's photos, installed in dark places, will never develop; others, installed in full sunlight, have already bleached away to oblivion. The final record of these chance differences is what interests Magor most, as a simple and moving metaphor for the vicissitudes of fate.

Rebecca Belmore, an Anishinabe artist who now lives in Sioux Lookout, Ont., took photographs of an unnamed Mexican woman and then exhibited them backlit on the marquee of an abandoned cinema in downtown San Diego.

The striking woman, whom Belmore had met on the street, was paid \$200 for each of two days of shooting. This was an enormous windfall for her family's economy, but less than 10 per cent of Belmore's fee for the art work.

Belmore is the first to point out the vexed nature of the transaction, and the imbalance of power in the relationship of artist to model. In the end, though successfully making visible a marginalized figure, her treatment of her sitter was just shy of exploitation. A native woman herself, Belmore chose here to walk a fascinating and dangerous knife edge.

Belmore's act of appropriation, for all its problems, succeed in its attempt to give a high profile to the invisibles of society.

If Belmore sailed close to the wind, American artist Patricia Patterson capsize outright when she revamped a poor home in the Mexican town of Colonia Altimira, near Tijuana. Having rented the house from a local family, Patterson oversaw the repaving of the courtyard, the reworking of the décor in a ferociously upbeat array of fuchsias, greens, aquas and yellows, and the display of family snapshots in colourful, homemade picture frames. But whose house is this, anyway? Patterson's "community collaboration" felt



Above, Ayate Car, by Betsabee Romero; left, Toaster Work Wagon, by Toronto's Kim Adams: Art that crosses boundaries.

Chicano Park Artists Task Force, a group which has been revitalizing an urban wasteland under a highway overpass, former site of San Diego's now-demolished historic barrio.

Some artists were drawn to the notion of blurring frontiers, often in quite a literal sense.

San Diegan Louis Hock, for example, installed a water fountain at the border, steps from the beach. Supplying drinkers on both sides with water drawn from the same source, Hock pointed out the arbitrariness of man-made demarcations and the folly of bureaucracy (the red tape involved was enormous.)

Others chose to explore the idea of boundaries quite metaphorically.

In the basement of a converted Carnation milk factory in San Diego, Colombian artist Fernando Arias delivered one of the most unnerving works of performance art in recent memory.

You enter Arias's dark underworld to find a metal barrier many metres long suspended across it; behind the barricade, the bare-chested artist is rigged up to an array of black-rubber

instruments and a variety of tubes, one of which burrows discretely into the front of his jeans. Responding to the artist's wordless encouragement, you look into an eyepiece connected to the tubes, only to find yourself treated to a fibre-optic tour of the artist's lower intestine. Experiencing both inside and outside at the same time, viewers were left to contemplate their own boundaries and limitations.

Not all encounters carried such high voltage, but several struck a chord of comedy that provided a kind of universal language that can leap borders.

Canadian Kim Adams, deploying a custom-built truck shaped like a toaster with wings, made quite a name for himself on the local scene by roving through the twin cities giving away samples of his trademark vehicle, the two-headed tricycle. Adams's vehicle, a kind of mechanical push-me-pull-you, can only be deployed successfully through co-operation, one user peddling backward while the other forges ahead. It's a shiny toy with big ideas behind it.

like Martha Stewart for the Oxfam crowd.

Some artists clearly took the residency requirement very seriously, but for others the show was business as usual. New York heavy hitters like Judith Barry and Loran Simpson turned out work which could have been made anywhere. (Simpson's video, shot in

glossy black and white, laid out a madly complex and translingual web of telephone relationships amid sultry thirtysomethings.)

The theme of borders and transgression was the thread connecting the show's wildly disparate projects — ranging from museum-style formal installations to the mural projects of the