

HISTORIAS DE EL SALVADOR

DE VIOLENCIA A RESISTENCIA

by Yon Hui Bell

The anti-immigration rhetoric, distilled to its purist logic, is nativist at heart—so I’ve been told. We have problems of our own and don’t have the resources to take care of other people’s problems. I can understand the sentiment—put on your oxygen mask first—but what happens to the sentiment and the logic if WE created their problems? What if the United States helped create the violence and chaos that resulted in a people frantically fleeing their country? What if the U.S. continues to promote policies that create violence and instability?

Salvadoran activists and artists, Alvaro Rafael and Dany Romero, discuss this topic movingly. Using painting and sculpture as well as poetry and photographs, their exhibit, “Historias de El Salvador: De Violencia a Resistencia,” offers a historical understanding of El Salvador’s current immigration crisis and the powerful resistance movements that are trying to heal the fractured country.

Some people know El Salvador from the years of civil war (1980-1992), when death squads were massacring people in the countryside in towns like El Mozote. The domestic altercations of this tiny country might have flown under the United States’ collective radar if the death squads had not also been killing priests and archbishops and raping and killing U.S. nuns. That got our attention. Our angst increased when we discovered that America was supporting this repressive regime. Not only were we providing millions of dollars in support but we were also training and arming their death squads, all under the guise of fighting communists, those radicals that wanted poor people to stand up for their rights. El Salvador was in our backyard, and we couldn’t allow them to follow the example of Cuba or Nicaragua.

If you don’t know El Salvador from the 80s, you probably know El Salvador from the photographs of tattooed gang members that accompany almost every post-war article about this tiny Central American country. By most accounts, there were more deaths in 2015 than there were during any year of the country’s civil war. The month of August alone registered over 900 deaths. In fact, El Salvador has been recognized as the most violent country in the western hemisphere several times – the distinction is given annually – and has taken second prize in this dubious distinction in many other years. The current Central American immigration crisis is



largely due to people fleeing this oppressive gang violence, which some consider another kind of warped civil war.

Rafael and Romero’s exhibit connects the two faces of El Salvador and the violence of the civil war to the violence of today. Thousands of Salvadorans fled during the civil war to El Norte and settled in Los Angeles, the second largest Salvadoran city after San Salvador, El Salvador’s capital. Seeking respite, they instead found themselves confronting discrimination and brutality, and in order to protect themselves, they grouped together. Mass deportation then spread this U.S.-born gang culture and violence back to El Salvador and other Central American countries like Guatemala and Honduras, which have similar histories of nefarious American involvement. Once again, thousands are fleeing chaos and violence.

Even more sinister are the connections the exhibit makes about the response to the problem. U.S. policies that have created dangerously segregated cities like Chicago, blatant police brutality, and the largest prison population in the world are being exported to El Salvador with multi-million dollar ticket prices. Responding with indiscriminate profiling and incarceration is especially iniquitous in an underdeveloped and impoverished country like El Salvador where poor youth can be picked up and thrown in jail without recourse to any legal defense. The profitability of gleaming facilities and the fat budgets of military-style immigration centers as the U.S. populace debates the current immigration crisis are also scrutinized. Some of the photographs in the exhibit from the civil war and from the last decade are eerily similar: rifled and armored guards lining up citizens.

Rafael and Romero, however, do not just compel us to see generations of Salvadoran youth caught in a cycle of trauma. Through their powerful artwork, they offer us reprieve and show us resistance. Rafael, who immigrated to San Antonio more than twelve years ago, uses recycled material to create works that evoke political manipulation resisted by indigenous strength.

As an urban student and community activist for all of my professional academic life, I have come to know the city mainly as a reflection of communities and their effort to create a space that reflects who they are in their dreams and goals. Those dreams include homes in neighborhoods where their children are safe, not to speak of education and health for the family.

A very important part of that city is the available public space that serves as a preserver of the community's history, culture, and recreative needs. Public space is where we can expand ourselves without interfering in our neighbor's private space. It is a little league park, a playground for children, and a river by which we can walk and enjoy its serenity. Public space is also where we can meet our aesthetic aching, an art gallery, a museum, a zoo, a place to meet as families and enjoy the day without owing anything to anyone. It can be as small as a sidewalk or a bicycle path. Today we have our river walk, a public space that is not simply a tourist attraction but open to our entire community. Where we walk, bicycle, picnic and meet each other.

Public space, then, is where as a community we can breathe air as free people, free from the frustrations of the day, from the office, free from the market where everything is up for grabs by the highest bidder. At the end of the day it is a reflection of a city that is owned by the community and not by private interests.

Not all of our citizens have had a hand in that creation. In San Antonio's history we have experienced the displacement of families from their homes and neighborhoods. In the 1950s the federal program Urban Renewal was implemented at a breakneck speed displacing entire communities and transferring those properties over to entrepreneurs in most instances. In the 1960s the city leaders, public and private, were rewarded with the HemisFair. The one caveat was that it was established where thousands of residents lived. That redevelopment continued to displace entire communities.

From San Salvador, Romero's poetry speaks of incarceration and the indomitable human spirit. The story behind one of the pieces, a hanging wall of painted t-shirts, is forceful. The original sketches about the inhumane conditions and degradation of incarceration by inmates in a Salvadoran prison were confiscated and destroyed, so the inmates repainted their art onto dozens of t-shirts, which visitors snuck out by wearing under their clothing.

"Historias de El Salvador: De Violencia a Resistencia" deepens the conversation our country is having about immigration and ultimately raises several questions: How can we destroy a country and then profit off its trauma and distress? Who besides the prison, weapons, and defense industry benefits from increased militarization and incarceration? Why is money not being spent on education, rehabilitation, and community development?

Through their work, Rafael and Romero ask us questions that force us to see beyond the tattoos and prison bars to the betrayed humanity of El Salvador. They ask us questions that all of us should be asking, not only about El Salvador but also about the United States. And by asking these questions, Rafael and Romero ask us to join in the resistance.

Continuing in this tradition, the decision makers of San Antonio, the visible ones which include you the city council, eagerly support a policy of helter skelter development with the goal of making San Antonio a magnet for upper middle class residents into our central city and neighborhoods where older communities have been for years. I can

only imagine that this goal is to make our city a first class city competing with any city in our part of the U.S. At first glance it is a grand scheme, creating more consumerism, the basis of an urban market economy. To many observers San Antonio has been quite successful in this growth and expansion.

We ask—at whose expense? As a consequence, we have witnessed the rush of developers of upscale high-rise apartments continue unabated, often times at the expense of working class or poor, but established communities. Countless residents have been uprooted from residences. Family life disrupted. The education of children disrupted. Coalitions of residents and community organizations have protested but to no avail. The mobilization of protest will continue. But you need to put your ear and heart to the ground and listen.

Now, one of our most sacred spaces is up for sale. And you, as the final say-so, are sponsoring what amounts to an invasion of a sacred space, the HemisFair, with a hotel owned, of course, by private interests not from this city.

It is a sacred space because entire communities were sacrificed to clear land that we now enjoy as HemisFair. The tragedy is that HemisFair was developed into a world famous public space in San Antonio by displacing entire communities, including one of the oldest Black churches in San Antonio, and now it is being handed over to private interests who are more interested in their profits than in our historical and cultural values. Full circle. Stop and think about what you are perpetrating on our community. Stop and think about the loss of public space and what it means to our community.

Public Spaces



by Dr. Rodolfo Rosales

"Historias de El Salvador: De Violencia a Resistencia" ran at the Movement Gallery/ Underground Library from June 18th to July 2nd and will be exhibiting in September at Galeria E.V.A. at 3412 South Flores. TBA. <https://www.facebook.com/galeriaeva/>

Bio: Yon Hui Bell is an instructor at San Antonio College and spent four years as an international volunteer in El Salvador that engendered a lifelong commitment to social justice, both global and local.

Disclosure: The author of this review is married to Alvaro Rafael, one of the artists featured in the exhibit.

