

CHRIS KRAUS

Kelly Lake Store

Post Art

Published in: Issue 17: The Evil Issue

Publication date: Fall 2013



Kelly Lake Store, Kelly Lake, Minnesota, 2011. Courtesy of Chris Kraus.

A version of this piece first appeared as the small book *Kelly Lake Store and Other Stories*, published by Companion Editions in 2012.

Forget about the Southern strategy, blue versus red, swing states and swing voters — all of those political clichés are quaint relics of a less threatening era that is now part of our past, or soon will be. The next conflict defining us all is much more unnerving.

That conflict will be between people who live somewhere, and people who live nowhere. It will be between people who consider themselves citizens of actual countries, to which they have patriotic allegiance, and people to whom nations are meaningless, who live in a stateless global archipelago of privilege — a collection of private schools, tax havens and gated residential communities with little or no connection to the outside world.

Matt Taibbi, "Greed and Debt: The True Story of Mitt Romney and Bain Capital," *Rolling Stone*, August 29, 2012

IN ONE OF THE OPENING SHOTS of Dana Duff's remarkable documentary *The Gringas* (2013), an anonymous man arranges small bales of hay into a circle in a dusty, dry field at the base of some mountains. The man and his bales are center-frame, long shot. It could be the present. Then again, if not for the row of white polymer grow houses deep in the background, it could be a period film set in the 19th century.

Duff is a Los Angeles artist who spends part of her time in a North Baja *campo*. Owned and administrated by Mexican families, the campos provide an alternative form of home ownership to non-Mexican nationals. Residents own their houses or trailers but pay a fixed rent to the Mexican landowners. In *The Gringas*, Duff set out to record the days preceding an American girl's *quinceañera*, the traditional Hispanic "coming into womanhood" celebration that occurs on a girl's 15th birthday. The girl, Lena Davies, lives with her elderly parents in a broken-down hippie bus that has come to a permanent rest in the hills of Ejido Esteban Cantú. Not far from Duff's campo, Ejido Esteban Cantú sits ten miles

south of Ensenada on a peninsula overlooking the small town of Maneadero. As in the film *El Field* (2011), Daniel Rosas's meditation on a day in the lives of Mexicali industrial farm workers, and Chantal Akerman's *From the Other Side* (2002), set on the Arizona/Sonora border, each shot of *The Gringas* is almost painfully long. All three films capture the protracted movement of time in the global economy's backwaters. These are places where time and space haven't imploded but, like the Davieses' old bus, have slowed to the point of stasis.

Born in the US, Lena Davies is an unlikely quinceañera. She has blond hair and blue eyes and the wide-open face of a midwestern cheerleader. Charming, athletic, and strong, Lena looks like an American teenager dressed for a day at the mall in her short, cutoff jeans, gold cross, and gold satin halter. Before her family's bus came to its final resting place, she spent the first eight years of her life traveling between West Coast communal pagan "events," where her parents supported themselves running a merchandise table. When her German-born father was arrested on charges of selling drug paraphernalia, they drove south and enrolled her in a Mexican grade school.

Now 15, Lena speaks fluent Spanish in Maneadero's local teen dialect. She attends the town's only high school. Maneadero has just two fully paved roads and a dusty *zócalo* (central plaza), but its youth is split into "north" and "south" gangs, based on a demarcation known only to them.

The family's bus, solar-powered by one salvaged panel, sits in a no-man's-land of unused ground that is part of the local *ejido*, or communally owned plot of rural land. On both sides of their salvaged-wood fence, seasonal workers who arrive every year from Oaxaca to work on the region's small industrial farms inhabit improvised shelters. In order to retain their family plots in their own ejidos, the workers must reside on them for three months a year, so they live in constant migration. A few yards from the bus, a boy rides a horse up a dirt track on the hill. A few Jersey cows forage for grass. The hillside is just a two-and-a-half-hour drive south of San Diego. Its farms produce flowers and the Los Cabos brand of tomatoes found at Trader Joe's. In a plaintive letter I read online, ejido leaders implored the UABCS (Universidad Autónoma de Baja California Sur) geographical science department to study their region's potential for ecotourism, "so we don't have to leave, and we can keep our land."

The Gringas follows the Davies family throughout the three days leading up to Lena's quinceañera. Having already attended the quinceañeras of most of her friends, Lena knows all the customs. Her microspace within the crowded bus is packed with an old desktop computer, books, clothes, and makeup. She and a few of her girlfriends (whose families live in Maneadero) have started a dance group, devising their own routines. Prompted by Duff, Lena steps outside to demonstrate one of their dances. Limber and all fluid curves, she's amazingly accomplished. Lena is *hoping* her Maneadero friends will all come to the party, but she's aware this might not happen. Quinceañeras are large celebrations staged by a girl's family, as much for their own friends as for their daughter. But her parents don't know the Mexican parents of her high school friends. She has no family here except for her parents, Lezli and Peter, who don't drink or party and are at least three decades older than the parents of most Maneadero teenagers.

Sitting on white plastic chairs outside the bus, the Davieses discuss the quinceañera on a long afternoon preceding the party. Both parents and daughter are well versed in the rituals, not all of which are observed universally. The Thanksgiving Mass? — only if the family is really religious. The Court of Honor is supposed to consist of fourteen friends and relations, but it can be smaller. Everyone has a beautiful dress, and has her hair done, and wears plenty of makeup. And there's the Last Doll — *La ceremonia de la última muñeca* — where the girl sheds her childhood by tossing a tiny doll over her shoulder. Lena doesn't know if she will have that. But the Change of Shoes — the moment when the quinceañera sits on a throne while her father replaces her flat childhood shoes with a pair of high heels — that's essential. It's all — as Lena's mother Lezli, a frumpy woman wearing a plaid flannel shirt and gray sweatpants, explains — very *Catholic*. She and her husband Peter — overweight and elderly and in a tight singlet, his foot-long beard braided — are *pagans*. Lezli, whose voice still retains a trace of her girlhood private school accent, thinks the Change of Shoes is degrading to women. Still, for Lena's sake, her parents are otherwise game. Peter has sent out thirty-five invitations in English and Spanish. Since local custom is for entire extended families of ten or more people to attend on one invitation, he's expecting a crowd. Although no alcohol will be served, the women will soak and boil a few pounds of hominy to make a posole. Lena is hoping her girlfriend

Berenice can serve as her *chambelán*, or official escort, a role usually played by an older male cousin or brother. But Lezli insists that Peter should be *chambelán*. He is her *father*. For the first time on camera, Lena's face appears cloudy.

On the day of the party, Lena's half sister, Dani, a student at UC San Diego, comes down to help her get ready. They visit a hole-in-the-wall hair salon where the beautician arranges Lena's blond hair into a stunning updo. Peter rigs a makeshift tarpaulin tent outside the bus, unloads some borrowed, dusty, white plastic chairs from a truck bed, and hangs lights from a roof pole. By the time Lena steps out of the bus in a black-and-white halter dress, two girlfriends are already there.

But as the sky darkens, no one else comes. Peter and Lezli are wearing the same flannels and sweats they had on two days ago. Soon, they'll put some Mexican music on an old boom box. People from the migrant encampment — all of them better dressed than Lena's parents — smiling, drift over the fence in search of the party. A small tribe of dogs yips through the cluster of people. Dancing and hugging her friends, Lena's excitement at turning 15 exceeds her despair at the lackluster party. By now the night is pitch dark. Across the Bay of All Saints, the low shimmering lights of Ensenada emit a deceptive urbanity.

Two hours south of the border, we are transported into a parallel universe — a collapsing of time, culture, and space — available, it seems now, to anyone, at the price of absolute poverty.

EARLIER THIS YEAR, I co-organized the exhibition “Radical Localism: Art, Video, and Culture from Pueblo Nuevo’s Mexicali Rose” at Artists Space in New York City. Mexicali Rose was founded by the filmmaker Marco Vera in 2007, when at age 28 he returned home to Pueblo Nuevo from Echo Park, LA’s hipster neighborhood. The space began as a media workshop for local kids. Since then, it has grown into something much larger: a gallery, radio station, cinema society, and informal clubhouse for artists on both sides of the border. Mexicali Rose is

open to journalists, activists, craftspeople, gang members, scholars, and neighborhood teachers. People from all over the world have passed through. Still, it continues to operate, both geographically and existentially, from the heart of the working-class, border-adjacent Pueblo Nuevo barrio.

Set on the Baja California desert directly across from Calexico (a small town in California's Imperial County), Mexicali is best known for its heat. For five months a year, temperatures climb as high as 120 degrees. The central city is a jagged collage of colonnades and arcades, sex clubs, and discount pharmacies ringed by the northern wall that separates Mexico from the US. The poorest of California's fifty-eight counties, Imperial County reports unemployment of 30 percent. Nevertheless, Mexicali's population includes, on any day, hundreds of transient people arriving from the south who have recently failed to cross the border or are awaiting their chance to try. Windowless dive bars stay open all night, and men in white cowboy hats stand around on the boulevards. In Daniel Rosas's *El Field*, squads of agricultural workers cross the border in darkness to ride buses that shuttle them to jobs in industrial farm fields. The first impression Mexicali makes on the casual visitor is: Who could ever live here? Yet the city inspires a fierce loyalty in its inhabitants, who affectionately refer to themselves as *cachanillas*, after the wild and virtually indestructible desert plant.

As Mexicali writer and critic Gabriel Trujillo Muñoz notes in his catalog essay: "Of all the border towns, Mexicali would appear to be the least inviting to settlers. What is it about this place, then, that its inhabitants find so appealing? Probably its plentiful and elemental nature. . . but also its cultural resources: a society of expanding horizons that, curiously, has yet to raise barriers against newcomers or self-impose a pedigree of entitled families to be the framers of its community. . . . The city has a predominantly working-class history. . . . Mexicali people do not need to believe that they are the center of the universe to compensate for what their home lacks as a city. They know what they have and what they don't. . . . We in Mexicali like to laugh at ourselves. To be presumptuous here is a form of suicide."

The Artists Space exhibition was more than a year in the making. It included documentary photographs by Rafael Veytia and Odette Barajas; paintings by Pablo Castañeda; an installation and zines by Juan Salcido; an original mural by Fernando Corona; a digital reproduction of *Mexicali* (2012), the stunning block-

long mosaic mural created on a derelict wall in the central city by a group of artists and municipal workers; and a dozen short films created in and around the Mexicali Rose media workshop. The work of Barajas and Veytia features portraits of gang members, transients, ancient-looking old men, and transgendered performers — subjects that, if depicted by someone from the outside, might seem exploitative and sleazy. But these photos are backlit by intimacy. They convey a sincere relation — *these people are known to us*. Banners from Julio Torres and Dino Dinco's 2010 Mexicali Rose show *Todos Somos Putos* were installed at the rear

of the gallery. Several vitrines contained a selection of news clippings and photographs donated by Sergio Haro, the Mexicali journalist whose legendary career tracing the “stories behind the stories” of Baja's narco-wars and political violence is chronicled in Bernardo Ruiz's film *Reportero* (2012).

In Spanish, the word “culture” connotes not just high art but a person's entire background and knowledge. Using the terms “art, video, and culture” in the Mexicali Rose exhibition title reflected the fact that the work of these artists — even those who have studied and exhibited throughout Mexico, Central America, and the US — is inextricably linked to the city's geography, history, and politics, and signaled the intangible value of culture beyond any one cultural product.

My first visit to Mexicali Rose was for the July 2010 opening of a group show called *Puro Personaje*, a remarkable mix of photos, paintings, and sculptures (both found and composed) by professional and amateur artists on both sides of the border, including family portraits and strange homemade porn scavenged from empty apartments. The space had just hosted a workshop for local women in the making of *alebrijes*, popular indigenous soft sculptures that consist of fantasy animals created by crossing two different species. The *Puro Personaje* opening started late and continued well into the morning. People arrived in groups. There was music and food. It felt like a block party. I was struck by the way that some of the artists made sure to point out that, while their parents might sometimes cross the border to work on Imperial Valley farms, they were *Mexican*, not *Chicano*. During my trip, we talked nonstop over beers at downtown cantinas, at the state museum where Vera's collaborator Israel Ortega works by day as a conservator, and while driving around town in Marco Vera's silver Camry. There was a seriousness to these proceedings, a desire to share not just information, but experience. A great deal of my art-writing work is

conducted online — airless exchanges of carefully worded prompts and artist statements. But this, and all my subsequent visits to Mexicali, felt as reckless and eager as a youthful road trip. What drew me to Mexicali Rose, beyond my admiration for all the artists, was the sense that this singular enterprise was the realization of a desire, circumstantially manifested in less totalized ways, running throughout the centers of the international art world.

Guggenheim Foundation Fellowship Proposal

Chris Kraus, September 2011

Kelly Lake Store, Kelly Lake, Minnesota / 2012–13

I propose to use Guggenheim Fellowship funds toward the lease/purchase and operation of the now-vacant Kelly Lake General Store in this hamlet outside of Hibbing, Minnesota. Reclamation of this once-functioning store will form the heart of this project. Though my involvement is finite, my intent is for it to become self-sustaining.

As Mike Davis reported in *Planet of Slums*, more than half of the world's population lives in large cities. By 2070, urban concentration throughout the world will exceed 70 percent. More than one billion people live in the slums of third-world cities. But this massive urbanization isn't limited to the global south. In 2008, according to a CIA World Factbook report, 82 percent of the US population was gathered in cities and suburbs. On any given day, 200,000 people are living on the streets and vacant land of LA, at least 18,000 of them within the downtown half-mile concentration of transient parks, food pantries, sidewalks, and shelters known as Skid Row. Meanwhile, since last summer, the population of Hibbing, Minnesota, has decreased more than 15 percent, to 16,203 residents. Anyone driving even a half mile north or south of American interstate highways will see the collection of dying or abandoned towns between the two coasts.

For the last decade, an awareness of the depopulation and dereliction of small towns and cities across the US has been central to my work as a writer and art critic. My novel *Torpor* (2006) describes the “negative entropy” gripping a small rural town in upstate New York. In recent columns for *Art in America*, I've

described the role artists play in the process of gentrification/urban revitalization. As Visiting Critic at Westminster University's Studio Art program in London, I suggested that a group of MFA students, who'd received \$20,000 of funding contingent upon their agreement to undertake a group project, use those funds to purchase, rehab, and occupy repossessed residential property in Detroit. To the best of my knowledge, this hasn't happened. But I propose to take up the challenge with this project, *Kelly Lake Store*.

Since 2009 I've rented a cabin each summer near Kelly Lake to write in seclusion. Founded in 1905 as a mining community, this village of 350 residents — some of whom live in the same houses where they were born — maintains a community/historical center in what once was its Catholic church. When I arrived, the Kelly Lake General Store sold gas, frozen pizza, and convenience store food to residents and cyclists on the adjacent Mesabi Bike Trail. In 2011, the store closed and hasn't reopened. Joe Terzich, the 62-year-old son of the store's original owner, still lives in the beige house next door.

According to town historian Erica Larson, "When Terz owned it, he sold meat, apples, and groceries. You could go there and shop for a meal. The problem wasn't the Wal-Mart [built six miles away in 1990]. . . it was more like the new owners turned it into a 7-Eleven. They took out the ice machine and put in digital gas pumps. It used to be, you'd go in and pay for your gas, and Terz would trust you to pump what you paid for. Nobody wanted to go there for an instant cappuccino. The things you went to the store for weren't there anymore."

Small local business is the lifeblood of every community. Once-important informal town centers — the diners, cafés, and coffee shops across Route 169's thirty-mile stretch between Hibbing and Grand Rapids — have all gone out of business.

Kelly Lake Store will entail the lease/purchase of these vacant premises and the operation of business for one year. Students from international MFA art and critical theory programs will be invited to "participate" — i.e., work in the store — on paid semester-long internships. Staffing will be augmented by local residents, who, like the interns, will be paid the prevailing local wage of \$10–\$15 an hour.

The business of *Kelly Lake Store* will be the store: selling gas, groceries, cigarettes, and other convenience store items. The store will not be used as a venue for art exhibitions or performances. Instead, interns and staff may choose to keep and/or create documentation of the store's work — photographs, drawings, texts, journals, videos, notebooks, and ledgers — that may be exhibited at a later time. However, the project's primary goal will be to make the store's business economically viable, and then transfer it to new, local owners at the end of the year.

My forthcoming novel *Summer of Hate* describes a similar enterprise (the purchase, rehab, and operation of thirty-six low-income apartments) undertaken in Albuquerque, New Mexico, in 2005. Since 2004, the Invisible Committee, a formerly Paris-based anarchist group, has resided in the small Limousin town of Tarnac, where they own and operate both the bar and the general store.

Kelly Lake Store can be seen as a radical revisioning of Claes Oldenburg's (and Elaine Sturtevant's) *The Store* installations of the 1960s, offering practical items for sale in place of papier-mâché sculpture. In these terms, *Kelly Lake Store* will address both a present-day need (in Kelly Lake, for a store) and a paradigm shift in the definition of artistic practice since that decade.

Date: Tues, 25 Oct 2011

From: _____

Subject: Guggenheim Competition

Dear Ms. Kraus:

I am writing to inform you that, upon further inspection of your application and supporting documents, we must withdraw your application from consideration in the 2012 United States and Canada competition. Support of the kind you are seeking lies outside the scope of our activities. Our Fellowships are not available to assist with the purchase and operation of a store or any type of business.

Sincerely yours,

John Simon Guggenheim Memorial Foundation

REVIEWING DOCUMENTA (13) for *New York* magazine, Jerry Saltz coined the term “Post Art” to describe “things that aren’t artworks so much as they are about the drive to make things that, like art, embed imagination in material and grasp that creativity is a cosmic force. . . . Post Art doesn’t even see art as separate from living. A chemist or a general may be making Post Art every day at the office.”

Visiting UC San Diego’s MFA program last year, I observed that at least two-thirds of the work produced by its students could not be described as painting or sculpture or video, or even as installation. Kate Clark, for instance, was cofounding Knowledge Commons DC (a free interdisciplinary school in Washington) and custom-making piñatas in San Diego. She’d developed the “business” through posters and blogs. “I use the word *business* in quotation marks,” she wrote in an email to me later, “because I consider [it] to be more about a trade than a creative practice.” Danny Cannizzaro was writing a novel that he plans to self-publish as an ebook. Iranian-born Elmira Mohebbali was studying ancient Akkadian in order to translate *Gilgamesh*. Tomas Moreno was compiling an archive of his father’s trade union and neighborhood organizing work in the Chicano community of the 1970s and DJing club nights at several LA Central American venues. Gary Garay was working on music. Trained as an architect, Lebanon-born Rayyane Tabet was preparing an ambitious project tracing the forgotten history of the Trans-Arabian Pipeline. He has since returned to Beirut to complete and exhibit it.

In describing Post Art Jerry Saltz writes: “It’s an idea I love. . . . Things that couldn’t be fitted into old categories embody powerfully creative forms, capable of carrying meaning and change.” But what meaning, what change? One of art criticism’s great limitations is its inability to look beyond its own context and language. Why would young people enter a studio art program to become teachers and translators, novelists, archivists, and shopkeepers? Clearly, it is

because these activities have become so degraded and negligible within the culture that the only chance for them to *appear* is within contemporary art's coded yet infinitely malleable discourse.

As the loose network of underground cinemas and film/video workshops established during the 1960s declined during the 1990s, documentary and nonnarrative filmmaking *migrated into the art world*. Films and videotapes that formerly would have been produced and exhibited on the underground film circuit came to be redefined as part of an "artistic practice." William E. Jones, Laura Parnes, Andrea Bowers, Bernadette Corporation, Sung Hwan Kim, and countless others produce films that demand continuous viewing but can only be seen in museums and galleries. *The economic viability of such work is shored up by the sale of associated drawings, photos, multiples, and other objects.* Viewed and discussed more in the context of the artist's career than in terms of the artwork's unique properties and politics, the visibility of these films has been gained at the expense of artistic volatility.

Likewise, *as the genre of "literary fiction" has regressed to describe only well-crafted, accessible stories, the work of writers such as Josef Strau, Moyra Davey, Mark von Schlegell, and countless others has been forced to exist not as books but as installation components or essays and conversations in art catalogs.* Oulipo member Harry Mathews, arguably one of the most important American poets of his generation, discusses his work with Bernadette Corporation member Jim Fletcher in artist Nik Gambaroff's most recent exhibition catalog.

When New York-based artists Amy Lien and Enzo Camacho wanted to study the growing subculture of the "call center crowd" in Camacho's native Manila, they created an art installation. As Lien explained in an email: "These call centers have developed into 'communication mills' that extend Filipino service cachet (friendliness, politeness, good English skills, social familiarity with American pop culture) into virtual assets. Generally young, earning a relatively very decent living, the call center workers storm clubs and bars during late nights and weekends and are known for their wild and sexually promiscuous behavior. Rumors abound. Because of the demand on many employees to work long shifts during unconventional hours (designed to accommodate American time zones) many of the call centers have sleeping rooms built into them which are believed to be sites for cruising and scandal. We imagined this knowledge transference,

this indoctrination of cultural difference, via strange mantras delivered during call center training workshops ('there's America and there's the rest of the world,' 'Americans value fact over feeling,' et cetera). The US is something of a dream, pervasively present in every living moment in Manila, due to the country's colonial history with the US and the continuing soft-colonial management of its political and economic policies."

Perversely, even as I write this, Journatic, a Philippines-based agency that supplies "local content" to US newspapers, has been exposed for its use of manufactured bylines. In LA, the staff of a leading business espionage bureau includes former investigative reporters and Pulitzer Prize-winning war correspondents. *Is it any surprise that Camacho and Lien, without ordinary journalistic outlets for their research, would choose to transmute it into visual metaphors — photographs and installations that can be exhibited in real space? For Camacho and Lien, there is a tremendous desire to know the world . . . a desire that seems greater to me than any involvement with visual art's intrinsically formalist questions.* As Lien explained by email: "I feel like I really need this engagement with the Philippines in order to avoid total cynicism while living and working in New York." *Market-driven though it might be, contemporary art offers a context for work that might once have been done within humanist disciplines that are now on the verge of becoming as extinct as ancient Akkadian.*

It is no longer accurate to refer to today's generation of young artists by nationality. Rather, they are Greek- or Estonian- or Australian- or South African-born, leaving those places for international cities to launch their careers in their late teens or early twenties. Consequently, the very idea of a "national" art has become an anomaly, found only in nether regions like Mexicali. The story of international contemporary art is now the story of global dislocation. Everybody's following the money, and the party, and few are ever rewarded. Exclusion keeps the dislocation moving.

Based in Berlin, Korean-born artist Sung Hwan Kim returns to Seoul to make *Summer Days in Keijo* (2007), a twenty-five-minute film in which a Dutch woman wanders through mid-20th-century architectural projects slated for demolition while reading a 1937 Swedish ethnographic text on Korea in voice-over. Greek-born, Berlin-based artist Yorgos Sapountzis stages videotaped sculptural interventions upon the city's historic landmarks. As he explained in an interview,

“When I first moved to Berlin, I didn’t know who the public sculptures depicted, I just knew they were important for somebody. But on the other hand, I loved to visit them and wonder: Why are they here, will they always be here?” (*Mousse*, Summer 2011). In New York, New Zealand-born artist Kate Newby places an ultramarine plastic pellet into a hole in the asphalt on Grand Street and then photographs it (*Grand St.*, 2012). Shaped like a teardrop or pill, the pellet fits perfectly into this small berth of space, a tiny industrial corpse in a snug coffin. In her Notes to Contributors for a book on her work, Newby writes:

In the street: puddles, pavings, falling stones

Interior design

Feelings and experiences

If I were to suggest a few things I would say . . . well, puddles are big for me right now. As are plastic bags caught in trees. I guess incidents or situations around me that seem simple.

In Rubén Marrufo’s short documentary *Aquí Seguimos* (2012), which was included in the video loop at the Mexicali Rose exhibition, a group of middle-aged *locos* (potheads) gather at night in a trashed public square to create an enormous mosaic mural. The film takes place in Estación Delta, about thirty miles southeast of Mexicali. Once a village of 5,278 inhabitants, Delta has shrunk to a handful of people in less than a decade. Some of its residents left when their homes were destroyed by the 2010 earthquake. Others moved to Mexicali or the US looking for work.

The muralists’ goal is no less than to reclaim their town. Dressed in sweatshirts, hoodies, and baseball caps, they look just like the day laborers you see standing outside any US Home Depot. They’re joined by a couple of women and a toddler who sits in a white plastic chair, just like the ones outside the bus in Duff’s *The Gringas*. Carrying buckets of fresh cement, the men talk to the off-camera director:

“Tell him the story of the bench.”

“You tell him, buddy.”

“No, come on, tell him about Rafael Martinez and all the locos . . .”

“When the first courtyard was built, we were here building it — ”

As the camera pulls back, we see the same cluster of low stucco buildings found in every small North Baja town.

“With all the construction workers, the Garnicas.”

“Well some of them have passed away, may they rest in peace. But, here we stand. Struggling to bring back this town that we need so much.”

While they work, the men recall yesterday’s parties.

“We had a good time.”

“But when they moved everything to Nuevo León, Estación Delta started to come down. They moved the bank, they also wanted to move the police station, but they didn’t. They moved the community bank and the other bank that was here . . . And they also wanted to move the post office . . . They were gonna leave the town barren — ”

“Good that didn’t happen.”

“And we are here.”

As night falls and more pieces of reflective glass and expertly cut colored tile are cemented in place, the mural takes shape: a huge, yellow wheat stalk; a man with a guitar leading a child through a field, the scene ringed with arcs of color; a shiny white tractor. Clamp lights are rigged with extension cords. Passing a joint, the men stand around an open fire, and the leader, whose name is Chope, sings a *narcocorrido* — a drug ballad.

“Goddamn it’s fucking cold!”

Once a mariachi, he now works in a train yard.

“You want to wash your hands?”

He pours water from a plastic jug.

“The son of a bitch feels like ice.”

“Keep pouring, buddy.”

“Wish it was like this in the summer.”

Marrufo’s film was commissioned by the PRI’s Municipal Office of Culture, which reportedly was not very pleased with it.

“Fuck this.”

“I think you don’t even bathe, man!”

“This hit went straight to my heart, it reminded me of — ”

“You’ll come back to the same hood where you were born.”

By the end of the night, the mural is practically finished. A radiant sun, shaped like a fan, beats down on the jagged hills. Concrete benches and planters are covered with mosaic daisies. When the camera pulls back, we see these agrarian scenes framed by swathes of mosaic curtains, as if set on a proscenium stage. It is the village at its most beautiful — a prototype of a past that might never have been, idealized through emotional memory. The last scene of the film finds Chope the next day, at work, in the flat dusty rail yard.


No community, no community art. Vera has described his work at Mexicali Rose as “activities born out of the necessities for cultural exchange latent not only in Mexico but on both sides of the border, therefore establishing cultural and personal connections.” There are no commercial galleries in Mexicali. The community’s artists rely on museum exhibitions, local collectors, mural commissions, and affiliations with US-border galleries to create a meager economy around their work. But instead of leaving, they have chosen to practice a radical localism, privileging friendships and shared experience over the dislocation and competition of the international art world. Outside its power bases — like Mexico City, where artists are fully enmeshed in the international grid — Mexicali artists are resolutely aware of their opportunity to remain in their own community and assert an alternative ethos.

When 73-year-old artist and muralist Carlos Coronado Ortega arrived in Mexicali with his family in his early teens, the provincial capital had no professional artists. Graduating from UABCS in the 1960s, Coronado and a group of close friends and colleagues formed an informal cooperative that continues to this day; theirs was the first generation of artists to remain in the city and shape its culture. Coronado continues to teach at UABCS, where his former students are now colleagues. His magnificent 2003 mural *Un Siglo Fértil* is installed in the Plaza de Centenario, protected by a twenty-four-hour guard — a municipal treasure.

Since the Artists Space exhibition last March, Marco Vera and Fernando Corona have traveled to Budapest, Prague, and Berlin, where Corona created an original mural at the ABC Art Fair. Corona remains committed to muralism. As he recently explained in an article on his work in *Zeta*, “The idea is to extend the [Mexicali-themed] mural we made in New York to other places, to bring out the particularities of this place, and connect them with others on a more global level.” This seems very hopeful.

And up north, Kelly Lake Store is still vacant and for sale. +

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