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## Exodus to the "Promised Land" Of the Devil and Other Monsters in Juan de Dios Mora's Artworks

Introduction by Deborah Caplow

Adriana Miramontes Olivas in conversation with Juan de Dios Mora

Translation by Paulina Pardo Gaviria and Adriana Miramontes Olivas

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### About the Authors

*Juan de Dios Mora is a printmaker and a senior lecturer at The University of Texas at San Antonio, where he began teaching painting, drawing, and printmaking in 2010. Mora is a prolific artist whose prints have been published in numerous venues including the catalogs New Arte Nuevo: San Antonio 2010 and New Art/Arte Nuevo San Antonio 2012. In 2017, his work was exhibited at several venues, including the McNay Art Museum in San Antonio, Texas in Juan Mora: Culture Clash (June 8–August 13, 2017) and at The Cole Art Center, Reavley Gallery in Nacogdoches, Texas, in Juan de Dios Mora (organized by the Art Department at the Stephen F. Austin State University School of Art, January 26–March 10, 2017). In 2016, Mora participated in the group show Los de Abajo: Garbage as an Artistic Source (From the Bottom: Garbage as an Artistic Source) at the Guadalupe Cultural Arts Center in San Antonio (June 10–July 29, 2016). Mora also curates the show Print It Up, which he organizes in the downtown area of San Antonio, thereby granting unprecedented exposure to numerous artists. For this exhibition, Mora mentors both students and alumni, guiding them through the exhibition process—from how to create a portfolio, frame and install artworks, to contracting with gallery owners, and selling artworks to the public.*

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*Dr. Deborah Caplow is an art historian and curator, and the author of a book about the Mexican printmaker, Leopoldo Méndez (Leopoldo Méndez: Revolutionary Art and the Mexican Print, University of Texas Press). She teaches art history at the University of Washington, Bothell. Areas of scholarship include twentieth-century Mexican art, the intersections between art and politics, and the history of photography. Currently, she is researching contemporary printmaking in Oaxaca, Mexico.*

# Exodus to the “Promised Land:”

## Of the Devil and Other Monsters in Juan de Dios Mora’s Artworks

Adriana Miramontes Olivas and Juan de Dios Mora

### Introduction

Juan de Dios Mora’s powerful prints present the intersecting cultures, visions, and realities experienced by migrants moving to the United States. His images locate the migrants thematically in the zone between life and death they all must cross on the journey—the border, the desert, the river, and the sea—always at their mortal peril, and always accompanied by hope and loss. Mora layers his images with Mexican and

Mexican-American history from ancient times to the present; they are deeply personal and autobiographical and, at the same time, stand for the lives and deaths of all migrants.

In the tradition of the prints of José Guadalupe Posada (1852-1913) and members of the Taller de Gráfica Popular (TGP), Mora’s works explore injustice and suffering, using a complex vocabulary of culturally specific signs and symbols, in his case, drawn from his profound relationship with Mexico and the journey northward. And, like the contemporary printmaker Artemio Rodríguez (Mexico, b. 1972), who works between Michoacán and California, creating images with pointed social commentary, Mora employs graphic techniques that have characterized political prints in Mexico for more than a hundred years. His black-and-white block prints combine fantastic symbolism with sharp critiques of social conditions, in tightly packed compositions—humorous, sardonic, inventive images that mock the powerful and sympathize with the oppressed. And, like the work of Oaxacan artist Alejandro Santiago (1964–2013), whose 2,501 ceramic sculptures (*2501 Migrantes*) express the pain and sorrow of migration in twisted, expressionistic statues of women, men, and children, Mora’s images operate at the levels of both the mind and the heart, so that a viewer comes to comprehend them through careful study that results in an emotional understanding.

In the prints published here, Mora often explores the theme of duality, ubiquitous in Mexican art since its beginnings. In his *Abduction of the Immigrant*, the migrant seems to hover between life and death, heaven and earth, while the winged demon who carries him is both devil and angel, with an eagle’s talon and a snakelike tail with Mayan glyphs at the end. Small, surreal dogs surround them, floating in the air like the little devils in some of Posada’s prints. According to the artist, the demon represents the U.S. Immigration Service (*La Migra*), and the dogs are their German shepherds. At the same time, the print is filled with opposites: good and evil, life and death, light and dark, food and water, Pre-Columbian and Catholic myth. The telephone poles can also be seen as crosses, marking a division that is both border and road, and evoking the graves that mark the way. The eagle, the cactus, and the snake represent the founding myth of Tenochtitlán, present-day Mexico City, and by extension the Mexican nation. Here, in *Abduction of the Immigrant*, they are fragmented, obscure references to national identity.

These dualistic allusions also animate *Assumption of the Immigrant*, with the words “alma” (soul) and “cuerpo” (body) framing the main figure as he rises through the air, his arms raised in a manner reminiscent of the Crucifixion. He is surrounded by a mandorla composed of a multitude of cherubim holding water bottles, an intricate grouping of angels, clouds, bottles, a rose, a bean, and limes, not as stereotypes, but as reminders of the migrants’ origins and the situations in which they find themselves. The limes, for example, are a daily part of the Mexican diet, and, as Mora explains, a humorous reference to the word the migrants use for the *migra*, who wear green uniforms. In addition, on one side, Mora includes an eagle’s claws and on the other a donkey hoof, while at the top an elaborate crown, reminiscent of an Aztec headdress, floats above the migrant’s head. The Virgin of

Guadalupe here is reduced to a partial sign in the lower corners, her cloak enveloping a cactus on one side and a water bottle on the other, a poignant reminder of the many migrants who perish of thirst in the desert in the attempt to cross into the United States.



**Figure 1**

Juan de Dios Mora, *Assumption of the Immigrant*, 2009, linocut, 24 x 18 1/8 in.

Mora's *Attacked by Fishes* contains much of the same symbolism. Here, a drowning man, surrounded by ferocious-looking fish, reaches for safety as though ascending—but the flimsy plastic bottles will not hold him, and he is weighed down by what seems to be a jar of holy water. The heart beside him is also sinking. His arms are raised, as though he were crucified, and the print also evokes an inevitable comparison to the biblical story of Jonah, cast into the sea to begin a journey as his destiny. As in the other prints, the sense of despair and disaster is balanced by a promise of spiritual salvation.

*A Coin for Breakfast*, though not about immigration, points to the poverty and deprivation that drive many migrants to leave their country in search of better living conditions. The struggle for daily survival is symbolized by the posters advertising the Lucha Libre, Mexican wrestling, and the *corrida*, the bullfight. The presence of the wall shrine, with its lit candle, and the beggar's upraised arms and eyes, give the impression of potential deliverance, while the dog and the accordion imply that life on earth has its compensations. As with all the prints discussed here, Mora offers hope in the midst of adversity, suggesting a bond with a higher power, infused with the profound spirituality of Mexican culture.

Now, more than ever before, these images have relevance and currency, as the world crisis in migration grows ever more dire, and the divide between wealth and poverty continues to drive people from their home countries into a dangerous and uncertain future.

*Deborah Caplow*

**Adriana Miramontes Olivas<sup>1</sup>:** Printmaking has a long history of activism and denunciatory art. In Mexico City, the Taller de Gráfica Popular (TGP), founded in 1937 and continuously active until 2010, emphasized the injustices committed toward the working class, political instability, social problems, as well as collective efforts and actions. The TGP focused on the daily life of the poor, and its artists demanded social change. Juan, your work is also motivated by politics and is critical of the economy, unemployment, international trade agreements, border security, and language, to name a few issues. What is the purpose of representing such themes?

**Juan de Dios Mora:** Something that interested me a lot when I came to the United States from Mexico was discrimination and immigration. In Mexico, immigration is a popular subject of conversation, whether it is from one place to the other, legal or illegal. But when I moved to Laredo, Texas, I was in a state of bewilderment. It all came to me in an unexpected manner because I was young, so I made those topics part of my artwork. How to relate this with the Taller de Gráfica Popular? I really like to represent social issues, too: to speak of Nuevo Laredo, Ciudad Juárez, the violence, and immigration. A lot of people do not want to talk about these topics, but they are out there, it is noticeable. *Assumption of the Immigrant* (2009) represents an immigrant who died. What happens to the immigrants when they die crossing the border? What happens to their bodies and souls? In reference to the physical, either the body or the bones are recovered and taken to the morgue. There are attempts to identify the corpses and there is a waiting time for the retrieval of bodies, otherwise they are cremated. But many times, the authorities do not send the remains to their countries of

<sup>1</sup> I also want to thank the collaboration and suggestions of my colleague Rae Di Cicco and the editors of *Contemporaneity*.



origin, because they do not know where the deceased come from. In my work, as in *Assumption of the Immigrant*, I try to give some credit to all the individuals who come to the United States, who move in search of jobs and better opportunities, and who leave everything behind including their land and their families in Mexico and Central and South America, but who often die in their attempts. *Assumption of the Immigrant* reflects a person who perished but whose soul goes to heaven. In other words, I am trying to acknowledge those events that many people ignore or neglect.

**AMO:** Your artwork references multiple sources. In terms of themes, I think of Guillermo Gómez Peña (b. 1955) and his "border art," but concerning process and content, I can relate them to the Aztecs and their "eagle warriors" from Mesoamerica, to the *Virgin of Guadalupe* (1779) by Sebastián Salcedo, and to *Mexico during the War: The Farmworkers Leave to the United States* (1982) by Leopoldo Méndez. However, your prints are completely different because they have not only numerous religious references and social criticism, but also imaginary beings such as the fish with claws or the dogs with horns. What are your sources? What do you read or see to inform yourself and get inspired?

**JDM:** When I first entered college, I knew of neither Frida Kahlo nor Diego Rivera. In the farm, there is nothing; I did not know anything about art. Even when I was already in the United States in high school, I was unaware of what the Renaissance meant. Once I enrolled in the core curriculum classes in college, I was taught about artworks by Michelangelo, Raphael, Leonardo da Vinci, and the prints of Albrecht Dürer. It called my attention how artists created the devil, especially in *St. Anthony Tormented by Demons* (ca. 1470-1475) by Martin Schongauer, because there are numerous paintings and artworks about the battle between good and evil and the devil is always portrayed differently. What I liked was that saints were represented by artists as human beings, and they were glorified, but demons were always distinct; they were made to scare people.

When I was in Laredo, we made fun of the immigration authorities, we said they were monsters. I began to compare the *migra* (border patrol agents) to the demons of the Renaissance by developing my own style, by creating hybrid figures. It is my interpretation of the devil, of how I saw and imagined it, and I hoped it would inspire fear.

The print *Attacked by Fishes* (2009) is about an immigrant who is trying to cross the border and is drowning. This print has a funny story because allegedly some fishermen found crocodiles in the Río Grande, so there were rumors being spread among members of the community, they gossiped and made jokes. People talked about crocodiles in the river! Later, it was said that some immigrants tried to cross from Nuevo Laredo, Tamaulipas, to Laredo, Texas, but when they stepped into the water they began to feel as if they were being bitten, so they went back to Mexico! The truth is that fishes were biting their skin, they were eating it. That is why I made the fish in a monster-like form, as demons, to reflect the innocence of numerous immigrants, but also to express their psychological state. There are several strategies that are used by the border patrol to prevent the passage of illegal immigrants. For instance, technology can assist them in capturing those who attempt to cross in an unlawful manner. Also, agents take advantage of the immigrants' psychological condition. Migrants come from far away, they have been on the road for a lengthy time, and the border itself represents another challenge. I try to portray their lives and struggles during this journey from their lands in Mexico and elsewhere, and then into the United States.



**Figure 2**

Juan de Dios Mora,  
*Attacked by Fishes*,  
 2009, linocut, 24 ¾  
 x 12 in.

**AMO:** Regarding activism and protest, have you organized, participated, or have you planned to establish a politically active organization or workshop in San Antonio, Mexico, or elsewhere?

**JDM:** Not right now. From 2014 to 2015, Andrei Rentería and I were teaching art to the community. We went to the shelters of children who crossed illegally to the United States, who came from Central and South America to search for their families or looking for better opportunities, and we taught them a little bit about the artistic process, of artists, and a few words in English. We donated our time to organize workshops, and we created artworks so that the children would learn about art. We were not allowed to ask them personal questions but they would share with us and would tell us about their experiences and what they had to go through. What they endured was really, really bad. In one way or another I could relate to them because I also come from Mexico.

**AMO:** You explained that when you arrived in Laredo you were young and the issue of immigration created quite an impression on you. How young were you, and why were you so affected by it? Was it that you ignored the issue of immigration, or why were you in such a bewildered state?

**JDM:** It was not that I ignored it, it was that in Mexico, coming to the United States is idealized. Over there the only thing one knows is that your dad, uncle, or cousin went to the United States and they are sending dollars for the family. That is wonderful! Right? But once I moved to Laredo, I realized how complicated issues really are; immigrants die, they are accused, and others go mad or become poor. Thus, all of these problems created an impact on me and I tried to compare my own life with that of other immigrants, and it is very different. Also, my experience of migrating from Mexico to the United States was distinct even though my family and I also came here as working-class people. To learn about other people's stories and about their experiences crossing the border helped inspire my artwork.

**AMO:** The United States is considered by many immigrants to be the promised land. In search of the so-called American dream, hundreds of men, women, and children attempt to cross the border each year. For undocumented immigrants, this journey is generally very expensive and dangerous. While it is difficult to provide specific statistics, due to the different countries of origin and the length of the journey, it is estimated that migrants pay the *coyotes*, or human traffickers, an estimated price of \$429 dollars (only to reach the border) and end up paying up to \$2,500 dollars to cross it.<sup>2</sup> In this journey, migrants confront an endless number of dangers. Immigrants are threatened, robbed, kidnapped,

<sup>2</sup> These statistics are as of 2014. Jeremy Slack and Howard Campbell "On Narco-coyotaje: Illicit Regimes and their Impacts on the US-Mexico Border," *Antipode* 48, no. 5 (2016), 1393; Joseph Sorrentino, "Mordiendo la mano que nos alimenta: trabajadores migrantes en Nueva York sin gozar derechos básicos," en Rufino Domínguez Santos, "Tiempos de Obama: Migración," *La Jornada del Campo* no. 17, 13 febrero 2009, <http://www.jornada.unam.mx/2009/02/13/migracion.html>

raped, and/or tortured.<sup>3</sup> In addition to these threats, once in the United States, for instance in the Arizona desert, the immigrants are exposed to 120°F temperatures during the summer and to freezing temperatures during the winter. Your artworks, *Assumption of the Immigrant, Attacked by Fishes, Abduction of the Immigrant* (2009), and *A Coin for Breakfast* (2010) reflect concerns with immigration. In your opinion, why would hundreds of people attempt to cross the border each year despite the challenges and risks this implies?

**JDM:** Personally, my dad had numerous financial problems in Mexico. He was in debt. In several countries, the issue of child labor is criticized, but since we were kids we worked and we considered it part of our lives. We assisted my dad on the farm during harvest. He would ask us to remove weeds and to grab the mattock. We worked really hard. We would work from one side of the farm to the other. But – how can I explain it – we were young and we did not realize that my dad was having numerous financial difficulties. Then, there was a time in which, frankly, my dad could no longer handle the financial distress and the debt. He decided to leave it all in Mexico to go to the United States. My dad recalls that the first time it was very difficult for him to cross the border because he had to find the *coyote* and also collect the money to pay him. He has admitted that he was really afraid about crossing the border. Back then it was easier, but now, with modern technology, it is more complicated. To cross the border my dad had to walk for days. He arrived at a stable of horses where their drinking water was really dirty, but he was so thirsty that he cupped both hands to quench his thirst. My dad remembers it tasted like soda! (Mora laughs). But the most important thing of this account is that immigrants move due to the economy. We were a large family, there were five siblings plus my mom made six. My dad was overwhelmed, he did not know what else to do. In Mexico, on the farm everyone talked about the United States, the “North,” the “North,” the “North,” and the “American dream,” the money, the “dollars,” the “dollars.” My dad being a responsible family man filled himself with courage and came here to work and save money. He later returned to Mexico for about a year. He went back and forth on several occasions. The third time that he crossed the border to the United States, an immigration reform was established and that is when he applied for our residency status. To live here was really hard for me and my family. The culture felt very different, but it was a nice experience. Hence, my dad left his country due to the financial situation, other people move due to violence.

**AMO:** There have been numerous attempts to prevent the crossing of illegal immigrants to the United States on its border with Mexico. This has created the so-called “funnel effect” in which migrants use alternative routes in remote areas to avoid being detected and detained, instead of the traditional urban crossing zones. This forces them into dangerous areas such as the deserts of Southern Arizona.<sup>4</sup> As a result, risks related to border crossing have increased. Even if the number of deaths on the U.S.-Mexican border remains unknown, statistics from the Border Patrol demonstrate that from October 1, 1997, to September 30,

<sup>3</sup> This is the case of the massacre that took place in August 2010, in San Fernando in Tamaulipas, Mexico, which received international attention, and in which 72 migrants of diverse nationalities were found dead.

<sup>4</sup> Daniel E. Martinez, Robin C. Reineke et al. “Structural Violence and Migrant Deaths in Southern Arizona: Data from the Pima County Office of the Medical Examiner, 1990-2013,” *Journal on Migration and Human Security* 2, no. 4, (2014), 262.





**Figure 3**

Juan de Dios Mora, *Abduction of the Immigrant*, 2009, linocut, 22 x 30 in.

2013, more than 6,029 people died.<sup>5</sup> In your print *Abduction of the Immigrant*, we see a landscape bifurcated by a road. There is also a young man whose body is being perforated by barbed wire. In one hand, he holds a bottle of water; in the other, he holds a bag from Soriana, the Mexican supermarket chain, perhaps with food provisions. The young man appears in mid-air fighting a hybrid creature. Despite the fight, he does not relinquish his water or his food. Could you explain, where are they? And could you tell us about the different body parts that constitute this monster, such as the different furs, diverse feathers, horns, and claws?

**JDM:** In the *Abduction of the Immigrant*, the demon is the border patrol and the dogs are the officers' dogs, the German Shepherd dogs. There is a corn in the sun and above it there is a bean. I use the corn as a symbol of fertility and it is a metaphor representing us, the immigrants, who move to the United States dreaming of a new life. When corn is planted, it provides food and it can also be used as money. So, this is a metaphor about those of us who move to a place where we can eat, make money, and also send it abroad so that our families can survive in Mexico. Therefore, this corn represents an idol and it has a circle, the halo. The bean inside it is a reference to the term *frijolero*, beaner, because I was called beaner. Thus, by showing the bean I take a humorous approach, but it is also a political statement. The nickname does not bother me, I adopt it as a strategy of empowerment. We can take what people say to discriminate against us and change it into something positive, that is why I use the bean.

In the *Abduction of the Immigrant* the hybrid figure is a representation of the devil, it is a demon, the border patrol. If you look closely, it has eagle claws, gazelle horns, and it also has four ears. It has a Renaissance style as when artists dramatized monsters, representing them in such a way as to scare the public. So here I did that too: I exaggerated it. The devil has a pickaxe to make it terrifying. In the left hand, he has a baton representing those of the border patrol. In its right hand, the devil has barbed wire that is also tied to the immigrant, lifting him up. The barbed wire has some threads, and hanging from those are some beans, which are a representation of us, immigrants, beaners. The devil's tail is a Mayan hieroglyph, and it has also some beans hanging down.

Below that is the image of the Virgin Mary, an icon of ours for encouragement, for survival, for giving life's full breath, a motivation for psychological wellbeing. Underneath her is a candle and a figure in the shape of a pear. This is a plant that can be dried, cut from the top (as a sort of lid), and will serve to carry water in it, as if a bowl. On top of the Virgin are two pieces of corn and those are like our seeds here in the United States. Right next to them there are two flying corns and from them a third corn is hanging, this one is half broken. In the farm in Mexico, we had to store the corn. When one harvests the product of an entire year and does not add some pills, it could go bad, since bugs and animals would get into it and eat all the corn. Those pills would kill the weevil, which is a beetle that would eat all the corn. So, I did this as a metaphor: if we do not work hard and do our best here in the United States, we could get ruined. This is the reason for the corn to appear in such a deteriorated condition, as if bitten by an animal. On the lower right corner, there is a grain of corn with barbed wire reflecting how, on occasion, one can also stumble and die.

The two dogs represent the border patrol dogs that are in checkpoints to sniff drugs and to perform other tasks. Underneath the animals there is a lime; in Laredo, we call the *migra*

<sup>5</sup> Cornelius, 1998, in Daniel E. Martinez, Robin C. Reineke et al., 258.

limes because they wear green, so I use limes a lot to represent the *migra*. Here they are bringing an immigrant to the devil. He is almost nude, reflecting that, when traveling from their countries, immigrants generally come with many things, but when they get here, they arrive almost empty handed. This is also a metaphor that material things are of low value. Soriana's plastic bag, now also HEB, Gigante, all those supermarkets, reflect Mexico's economic state.

I made a road on the bottom. That means that many times in the desert there are roads around, but they are for ranchers, or for the *migra*. If you look closely, there is nothing around other than telephone poles. Many times, people walk on those roads, but if they do so they can leave their traces increasing their chances of being caught by the *migra*. Nonetheless, the road can provide an opportunity for survival, because if immigrants are tired, they can sit on the road until somebody gets there and rescues or reports them. To reiterate, the road can be a lifesaver, but if immigrants get caught, the American dream would be out of reach. I want to emphasize that these roads are more for last chances, when immigrants are about to die.



**Figure 4**

Juan de Dios Mora, *A Coin for Breakfast*, 2010, linocut, 26 x 27 ¼ in.



**AMO:** In your work *A Coin for Breakfast* we see a man that could be homeless. He is on the street asking for “a coin for breakfast” and, even if his location is ambiguous, on the back we can read a sign that says “Pobres Street” (“Poor Street”). Is this a reference to the failed promise of the American dream? You have lived in both countries, Mexico and the United States. You left your hometown to come to the promised land, as many others have. Now that you have lived here for several years, do you still believe in the American dream?

**JDM:** The American dream has indeed been realized for me, I cannot deny it. It has taken me where I wanted to be. *A Coin for Breakfast* is about the border between Nuevo Laredo in Tamaulipas and Laredo in Texas. It is about countless people who stay right next to the international bridge asking for money to live each day, collect some dollars, pay the *coyote*, and cross from one side to the other. Many times, at the international bridge in Nuevo Laredo, there were numerous people begging and they had their children with them, playing some sort of maracas or an accordion. It made me sad and I gave them money. What I did in this work was to partially reflect that. Numerous times, families and their children stay at the border. On other occasions, the father crosses the border first, and sometimes, in doing so, he dies or goes to jail. Fathers also come to the United States and initially send money to their families but they later forget about them because they find a new partner, or they simply forget their loved ones. So, I made *A Coin for Breakfast* to reflect that, and instead of a kid I added a dog and a hat to it, so he would entertain. I would not like to have a kid there, I want my work to have a political tone, but I do not want to make it too cruel. Dogs are man’s friends, and many homeless people have dogs. On top of the image, there are two candles with a bean, and the bean has the shape of Virgin Mary’s veil. On the background there are some houses, like those in the United States, implying the American side.

**AMO:** Juan, in your prints we can see the veil of the Virgin of Guadalupe, the angels, and candles. Why does religion play such an important role in your work?

**JDM:** Religion is meant to aid in maintaining a positive attitude and to help one move forward every day, to make one forget about certain things that are remarkably dark, or for people who have lost their families. It is more about encouragement to keep living and looking forward.

**AMO:** In your prints, a cactus and a bean substitute the image of the Virgin of Guadalupe. Although the reference to Mexico and its people is obvious, do you think this can be offensive for certain religious audiences?

**JDM:** Yes, I grew up in a very religious home. When I started my education, I became more liberal, accepting other cultures and asking myself, where do I come from? What is this? Why do they say that? Religion has many positive things, but also many negative ones. Religion maintains one’s positive thoughts, but if it is engrained very deep in the mind, it could be a poison instead of a source for help, and many times one must adopt other ideas to be able to stand out. My objective is not to be offensive. Many times, I add a bean to reference the political situation, but I know that something will be shaken.

**AMO:** Juan, do you think the use of this plant, the cactus, and this food, beans, as icons propagates stereotypes about Mexico?



**JDM:** Yes, I cannot deny that, but as an artist one has to liberate oneself, I have to be expressive about how I feel. In my family, we always make fun of certain things. We have a very good sense of humor, and that has helped me to adopt wittiness in my work. In a way, I also do that to illustrate how *gringos* see us as beaners, as nopal cacti. I do this as a way of exemplifying how another demographic group perceives us.

**AMO:** The recently elected president of the United States, Donald Trump, has made several provocative declarations against Mexico and its people. How do you think Mexicans should respond to his discourse, and how do you think a country of immigrants, as the United States is, should react to his discourse?

**JDM:** We should continue to work just as hard during these four years. We should not have a crazy reaction but rather, as all activists do, act peacefully, without any violence. In this country, there is still discrimination and hate. This is a time to realize that, and to be fully conscious of how hard the situation is here. We talked about the promised land, but there are also difficulties. Here you come to earn dollars, but you also get discrimination.

**AMO:** Juan, is there any way to stop immigration to the United States, or, rather, is the so-called "funnel effect" always present? Is it possible to stop immigration with a wall? What would you like to tell scholars and legislators?

**JDM:** No, there is no way, it cannot be stopped. The only thing that changes periodically is the process to cross from one side to the other, but it does not stop. People will keep crossing the border. Technology makes it harder, but there are many ways to evade technology, one way or another people cross the border. What the United State likes to do is to spend money. They are like the Romans who used to stage plays in theaters, have gladiators killing each other to keep their empire entertained, but also to keep the loyalty of their people. So, here in the United States, there is something similar. To those of us who are here, they offer us many, many things to stay calm. The wall is to keep people calm. But we are resilient. Jokingly, I say that we are like nocturnal animals; we know how to get in and out from one place to another in search of better opportunities.

**AMO:** In your opinion, what should the role of the Mexican state be in relation to immigration and to the Mexico-U.S. border?

**JDM:** The most clichéd solution would be to have more jobs, more employment, right? To get higher compensation for the crops of all Mexican ranchers, to have more opportunities, just as here in the United States where all land workers receive better subsidies to be able to pay for industrial machinery, pesticides, and better taxes. In Mexico, there might be some of that, but it is hard. I say there should be money distributed for workers to stand out and survive each day.

**AMO:** Your work has paradoxical characteristics. It usually offers a strong message with a severe critique of contemporary politics and other events, but it also has a sense of humor. You provide unexpected details that modify a work's serious tone, and provoke laughter and

entertainment. In fact, you said in a 2013 interview with Sabrina Alfaro, “I do not like to get political because there are many other artists doing so, I am funny and I try to be funny.”<sup>6</sup> However, in *Assumption of the Immigrant*, *Attacked by Fishes*, *Abduction of the Immigrant*, and *A Coin for Breakfast*, humor seems to have disappeared from your work. What happened to the irony in these prints and why is their tone so serious?

**JDM:** These four works are from 2009–2010. Since then my work has changed tremendously. Sometimes I do not want to get involved in politics. However, we are all influenced by it, whether we like it or not, whether we are aware or unaware of it, we live with it. It is part of our lives. This is reflected in my prints, being funny or not. My artwork sometimes denounces a certain type of system or tries to educate the community about problems that are currently taking place and that we sometimes ignore or neglect. When I focus on politics, I do it to represent my culture and my community, to point to outrages, discrimination, and even the poverty that we sometimes overlook.

**AMO:** In your prints such as *La Dust Demonica (The Dust Devil, 2011)* and *Mi Nave Can Fly! (My Spacecraft Can Fly!, 2011)* we see bilingualism or code switching from English to Spanish, which is characteristic of Chicano art. Why and when do you use Spanglish? Why do you only use Spanish, for example, in *Abduction of the Immigrant* or *Attacked by Fishes*?

**JDM:** The audience is very important. If I want to get more political, I must address them straightforwardly. In *Attacked by Fishes* there are some ribbons and one of them says, “se me va la vida” (“my life goes by”) and the other one says, “el agua bendita de todos los días” (“every day’s holy water”). I made this as a sort of hidden message. It is funny when I start using words in English here and there, as if playing. I really like it.

**AMO:** How important is it for immigrants to maintain their language, religion, and cultural identity through different traditions, celebrations, food, music, dress, literature?

**JDM:** It is very important, it is what informs our way of thinking, our daily life, and how we act. All this helps us psychologically to move forward. That helped me to shape my identity and to show myself in a unique way. Our culture is very beautiful. It is very important to keep our culture and language alive and to transmit them to our children.

**AMO:** What are you currently working on? Are you developing different themes?

**JDM:** I am currently working on new prints called *Soy lo que soy (I Am What I Am)*. It is a new series of working people, of how they perform any job with a positive attitude regardless of how simple or humble it could be. I am trying to address it in a heroic way, symbolically,

<sup>6</sup> Interview with Sabrina Alfaro, October 2, 2013, presented at University of Texas at San Antonio on October 10, 2013.

grandiosely. For example, there is one of a street cleaner who is seated proudly on a pedestal. They are all on a pedestal. There is another one called *La hormiga guerterita* (*The Little Warrior Ant*). I made it when we went to the children's refuges. It shows a child and a mountain. Instead of a pen the kid has an ant, because ants are hard workers and are always following a straight path. There is an angel and a shield with a Mayan calendar, and there is also a wrestler's mask because in Mexico we say, "fight for your dreams," or "keep wrestling."

I would like to say that my work is to motivate others. I want to tell my people that it is possible! With a positive energy and attitude anything is possible, any path they want to follow: arts, media communications, anything that is good for this world is possible. And for the new generations, do not forget your culture because we are a working people; we are not from a lazy culture, as many people say. We must keep motivating younger generations, erasing old stereotypes, and moving forward.

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