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## Exploring Socio-Political Issues Beyond International Borders with Andrei Renteria

BY DELIASOFIA ZACARIAS | SEPTEMBER 3, 2019

Human rights injustices are not contained to one country or location. These socio-political issues go beyond international borders. San Antonio-based artist Andrei Renteria sat with us to discuss his experience during his 2017 Blue Star Contemporary Berlin Residency and how his artistic practice is offering an access point to further explore and discuss accounts of violence, intimidation, drugs, and free speech in his home country of Mexico.

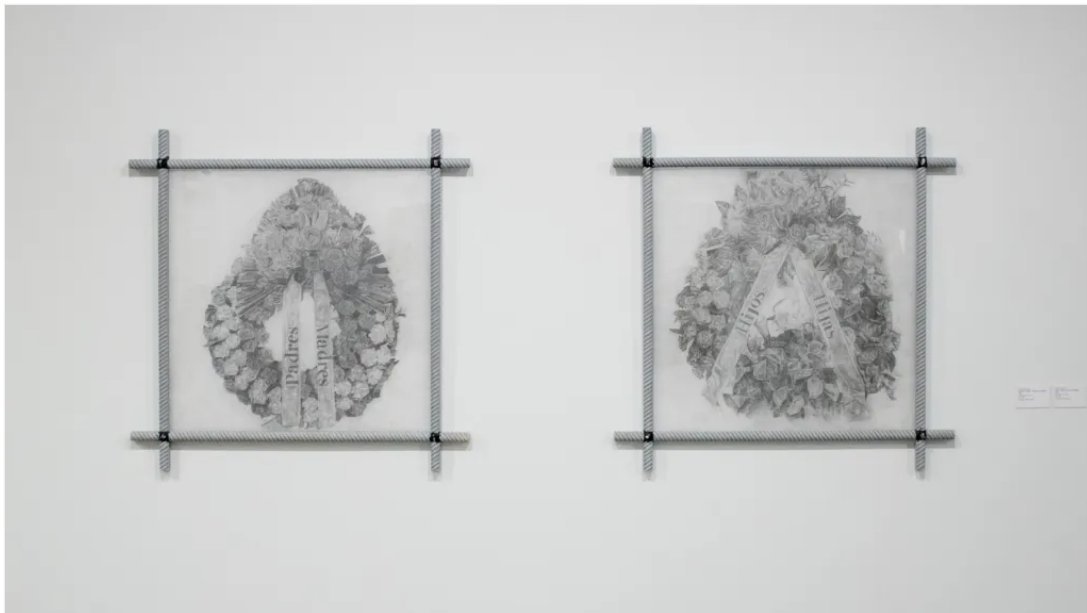
Andrei's research really developed when he stumbled upon a Spanish bookstore in Berlin. In the shop, Renteria came across many Spanish publications that consequently incited him to focus his research on Mexican journalists during his time at the Künstlerhaus. Renteria shared with us that, specifically, the books that influenced his work the most were *La Fabrica del Crimen* by Sandra Rodriguez Nieto, *Fuego Cruzado: Victorimas Atrapadas en la Guerra del Narco* by Marcela Turati, and *Confesión De Un Sicario: El Testimonio de Drago, Lugar Teniente de un Cartel Mexicano* de Juan Carlos Reyna. These authors/reporters investigated areas that they know and live in. It was the in-depth accounts and vivid detail of such explicit and perverse situations that intrigued Renteria most.



*Installation Photo by Jacqueline Saragoza McGilvray. Courtesy of Blue Star Contemporary.*

***In a way, I started to think they aren't ordinary reporters, they are investigative reporters so its the type of research that you are looking into further and further down. That intrigued me! I knew that was something I wanted to do. So, I started thinking about the language that they were using and how they were defining it. I guess in the books they describe it as the apocalyptic, a surreal landscape of what was happening.***

Renteria began asking himself: What types of messages do I want to send and how do I want to send them? What is the language of war? What is the language of violence? And how can I deliver that? One manner in which he chose to develop this visual language of violence is to utilize images with dual meanings. One such object is the wreath, which as we know is originally used to honor or pay tribute to someone that has passed away. However, some gangs utilize the wreath to intimidate and threaten folks, insinuating that the targeted person will die soon.



*Installation Photo by Jacqueline Saragoza McGilvray. Courtesy of Blue Star Contemporary.*

Each drawing of the wreath is meticulously rendered and was influenced by the work of Rauschenberg and Cy Twombly (work he saw on his frequent visits to the Hamburger Bahnhof Museum). Renteria examined how the marks appeared simple yet complex in that each line varied in efficiency, speed, and weight. Each wreath is composed of bone-like floral arrangements and contains a soft rendering of a name-stitched ribbon draped diagonally across its center. They are finished with a rope-like frame inspired by his research on extermination zones in Mexico. Renteria intentionally chose the rope border to reflect the grid formations similar to how archeologists mark sites to excavate.

***I knew I wanted to create every mark unique, hone in on the structure and do it through-line. Not as whimsically as Cy but structured. It was something that I wanted to incorporate... to study the structure of war, language of war and language of drawing and break it down to the basics/ fundamentals of drawing.***

Being exposed to the practice of his fellow artists-in-residence at Künstlerhaus Bethanien led Renteria to explore three-dimensional works. The incorporation of the rope frame speaks to the artist's intentions of making his works on paper become more dimensional. But Andrei pushed out of his comfort zones upon his return to the states. In this exhibition, Renteria uses a variety of materials including drums, car doors, canvas, and mixed media. The car door with graphite and bullet



*Installation Photo by  
Jacqueline Saragoza  
McGilvray. Courtesy of Blue  
Star Contemporary.*

holes hanging at the center of the exhibition space takes everyone's attention. With this piece, Renteria pays tribute to Miroslava Breach, Mexican investigative journalist for *La Jornada* and *Norte de Juárez* in Chihuahua City, Mexico and known for her reportage of human rights violations, drug trafficking, and government corruption. His research led him to decipher different types of executions and body placements. He shares, "it was an internal language I wanted to understand." In this case, Renteria marked down the words "Lengua Larga" on the inside of the car door resembling the message left on

Miroslava's car when killed.



*Installation Photo by Jacqueline Saragoza McGilvray. Courtesy of Blue Star Contemporary.*

Whether it's etched words on car doors, texts on wreath banners, artwork titles, or listed mediums, text is a major component in Renteria's exhibition. *El Toque Antes Del Grito* serves as a bigger enigma in which the artist questions the role the consumers in the U.S. adopt. Shaped into a large blunt with toy soldiers placed on top, the mixed media sculpture is

placed against a thin column at the center of the space. Renteria looks at the wider scope of cause and effect and asks the viewer to reflect on their own role in this perpetuated cycle of supply and demand. The title is translated to *the toke/sound before the cry (cry of war)*. He plays with language but also emphasizes the language of a militarized country, in this case, Mexico's national anthem. The first stanza in Mexico's national anthem clearly states "Mexicanos al grito de guerra .." (Mexicans, when the war cry is heard,...) and finishes the second stanza with "Un soldado en cada hijo te dio" (A soldier in each of your sons).



Installation Photo by Jacqueline Saragoza McGilvray. Courtesy of Blue Star Contemporary.

Andrei continues his play on words and translation in the piece titled *El Guiso*, the Spanish term for stew. The artwork consists of an elongated wreath drawn on paper encased in a barrel-shaped acrylic container. He stated that if "the wreath itself is a representation of the human figure, then this is one way they get rid of those people." One of the many ways to make a body disappear is to put it in a 55-foot barrel with acid and dissolve it over time. Renteria shared that going to Berlin only reaffirmed his inclination towards Gustav Metzger, a German artist that developed the concept of Auto-Destructive Art — art



Installation Photo by Jacqueline Saragoza McGilvray. Courtesy of Blue Star Contemporary.



that destroys itself because it represents the human condition in that the human condition is self-destructive. “I thought it made sense to incorporate that idea in my work. Putting that drawing in the barrel and damaging the drawing to wear over time. It starts to deteriorate.” Despite the wall label listing the chemicals used to dissolve a person in real life, Renteria used a combination of household cleaning products and poured it on the paper instead.

It’s no secret that Renteria’s approach to such a heavy subject matter is truly impactful. He is able to touch on explicit topics without any gory shock factors. Through this body of work, Renteria continues to highlight parallels between the division created by borders and those of discrimination, persecution, unlawful imprisonment and human rights abuses that continue unabated. For those who question the artist’s intentions in portraying Mexico in a very dark lense, he shared ...

***I think it is a part of our history that should never be forgotten, that should be reflected on, should be investigated and people should be taken to justice. Because it is easy to forget and it is easy for people to say we didn’t help, or negate any part of it or decide to be neutral. For people living in Mexico, it’s how we are always portrayed and there is so much more to that. But I want to make the people on this side of the border reflect. Mexicans don’t need to reflect on it cause they live it.***

In Mexico, the conversation about violence has been desensitized and integrated into everyday conversation. Artists like Andrei Renteria are part of a creative community that has found a voice to approach this cruel reality and provide context to those who are privileged enough to be unaware of it. Renteria’s powerful exhibition embodies weight, emotion, and overall, a narrative that concerns more than one country. Stop by and visit Andrei Renteria’s exhibition space as part of FÜNF at Blue Star Contemporary, on view through September 8, 2019.

### About the Artist

Andrei Renteria is an artist working in drawing, painting, printmaking, sculpture, and assemblage. His work reflects his strong and longstanding interest in socio-political issues along the U.S./ Mexico border. Renteria realizes that there are parallels between division created by borders and

those of discrimination, persecution, unlawful imprisonment and human rights abuses that continue unabated. As we face the challenge today of worldwide recognition of human rights and freedom, his experimental approaches provide a powerful forum from which he investigates how to address and embody weighty subject matter (including torture and violence) beyond international borders.

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Deliasofia Zacarias is one of the Unfiltered San Antonio co-founders. Double-majored in business and studio art, Zacarias is interested in art politics, food, and a whole lot of Netflix. She is currently LACMA's Emerging Art Professional Fellow in Los Angeles, CA. [View all posts by Deliasofia Zacarias](#)

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