

Frontera 450+

Station Museum of Contemporary Art

Margo Handwerker

Frontera 450+ is a memorial to *las muertas de Juárez*, the scores of women—mostly young maquiladora workers on the U.S.-Mexico border—murdered in and around Ciudad Juárez. In truth, the figure 450 is but a guess in terms of body count; the number of women kidnapped and/or killed in the area over the last two decades is unknown, and their murderers remain unidentified. Whereas most memorials pay homage to their subject through the use of a single image, *Frontera 450+* presents seventeen individual tributes to the memory of these women. Representation differs dramatically but common themes prevail, most of which aspire to transform sympathy into empathy.

One of the most heartbreaking aspects of the Juárez *feminicidios* (femicides) is the widespread grief of the affected families who have come to rely on each other for both protection and solace. Filmmaker Lourdes Portillo's award-winning documentary *Señorita Extraviada* (Missing Young Woman), for example, fuses the factual chronology of the Juárez case with the personal accounts of loved ones. Utilizing the voices of family members, Portillo's documentary communicates their collective fears, frustrations and sadness. In witnessing the parents, siblings and others involved discuss this case, viewers feel less removed from both the victims and their families. Teresa Margolles evokes a related sentiment with *Cimbra Formwork*, a wooden box containing cement-soaked clothing, some of which belonged to the victims. As the viewer approaches the tomblike sculpture and peers down, proximity to the morbid relics it contains becomes overwhelming, physically truncating the distance between victim and viewer.

In addition, Margolles addresses the significance of place in the sound element of *Cimbra Formwork*. She removes all sensory orientation except the ambient sound of barking dogs, leaving the viewer—like the victims and their families—deeply disoriented and perpetually lost. Place is a dominant theme in this exhibition and a significant component of Maya Goded's *Justicia para Nuestras Hijas* (Justice For Our Daughters). Goded photographed the families of known victims in Ciudad Chihuahua, Juárez and the nearby state of Zacatecas, paying tribute to them in much the same way as the deceased and missing are memorialized by their families in portraits, which are occasionally included in the frame. Relatives



Maya Goded, from the series *Justicia para Nuestras Hijas* (Justice For Our Daughters), 2004
Inkjet print on cotton paper
39 x 39 inches

are either photographed in their homes—often in the missing or deceased's bedroom—or in remote parts of the desert where their children went missing or their remains were discovered.

Goded's emphasis on the sheer number of murders puts a human face on an almost intangible case. Likewise, Carmen Montoya's installation *El Aire Me Habla de Ti* (The Wind Speaks to Me of You) alludes to the volume of victims and, again, to the significance of place. A monitor situated on a small dressing table records a woman's route home from a *maquiladora*, barren areas in which many of the victims were last seen. The sound component of the piece names several victims and describes the condition of their mutilated bodies. Though gruesome, Montoya's monotone descriptions are not the most bothersome aspect of the piece; it is the repetition of one brutal account after another that weighs heaviest on the listener.

Lise Bjørne employs the same strategy in *Desconocida* (Unknown and Ukjent). Bjørne traveled the world asking women to embroider the names of women of Juárez. Arranged on a wall as Morse code, small patches spell out the lyrics to the Mexican National Anthem. The unidentified are represented on the wall as well, with the word "unknown" written in each embroiderer's native

language. *Desconocida* is one of several works in the exhibition that reference "women's work," including Susan Plum's *Luz y Solidaridad* (Light and Solidarity)—a recording of *Nuestras Hijas de Regreso a Casa* (May Our Daughters Return Home)—a traditional *limpia* (spiritual cleansing).

Conceptually referencing the work of Claes Oldenburg, Margarita Cabrera's *Maquila* (Factory) is a series of soft sculptures. The artist collects plastic machine parts—toxic elements manufactured in maquiladoras—and inserts them into hand-sewn appliances. The type of labor *feminicidios* carry out is related to their method of capture, as many known victims were last seen en route to or from

work. Their social status fosters the perception of these women as somehow subordinate—disposable—which perpetuates indifference toward their plight. Cabrera's series makes this point physically tangible.

The undertone of women as victims is a poignant component of the exhibition, albeit a problematic one. In *Maria de la Arena Seca* (Maria of the Dry Sand), for example, David Krueger recreates an oversized roadside memorial in the form of a dismembered mannequin soaked with blood, surrounded by a desert landscape with clothes and shoes embedded in the sand. Likewise, Teresa Serrano's *La Piñata* records an actor aggressively beating a piñata shaped like a young woman. Although the violent, disturbing footage is a powerful glimpse at the sadistic impulse, such works—like many in the exhibition—emphasize victimization, as though all the women of Juárez are already dead. While it is essential to mourn those who are, it is more important to empower the women who are still alive.

The show ended (or began, if one attended the opening) with a tearful reading of names, followed by a zealous performance by Elia Arce—a poetic call to arms complete with protest sign in hand. Such an impassioned work, like the entire exhibition at its core, stirs emotions, potentially raising awareness and, most importantly, action.