

Unraveling and Customizing the Language of Power

by [Raquel Gutiérrez](#) on February 9, 2016



Installation view of Mely Barragán's "Macho" (2009), thread pillow stuffing and fabric, variable dimensions, in 'Customizing Language' at Los Angeles Contemporary Exhibitions (photo by the author for Hyperallergic)

LOS ANGELES — [Customizing Language](#), organized by Los Angeles-based curators Idurre Alonso and Selene Preciado at Los Angeles Contemporary Exhibitions (LACE), explores how geopolitical power is expressed and managed through language, and enhances our understanding of it as a verbal communication system. Invoking artist Alfredo Jaar's caution in his 1987 work "[A Logo for America](#)" that "language is not innocent and reflects a geopolitical reality," the exhibit features works by 10 artists probing a variety of contemporary issues through a linguistic lens.

Gender inequity, immigration, imperialism and the politics of location, failed utopias, hegemonic interventions, and postcolonial trauma are all represented through multi-media works which defamiliarize language and creatively generate dialogue with the viewer. As Preciado pointed out, the word "customization" playfully takes on multiple meanings in the show, from the "custom" of cultural Latino traditions, to the "Customs" of border immigration issues, to the "customization" of lowrider cars (a car modified so that its ground clearance **is less** than its design specification and that was first made popular by West Coast Chicano car clubs in the 1970s).



Installation view of Marcos Ramírez ERRE's "Tolerancia, confianza, respeto. (y una definición de represión) / Tolerance, Trust, Respect. (and definition of repression)" (2015) (click to enlarge) (all images courtesy Los Angeles Contemporary Exhibitions unless otherwise noted)

The exhibit begins with Tijuana's own Marcos Ramírez ERRE's "Tolerancia, confianza, respeto. (y una definición de represión) / Tolerance, Trust, Respect. (and definition of repression)" (2015), a series of repurposed riot police squad shields printed with vinyl text that reads "La represión es la violencia del poder al defender lo ya perdido / Repression is the violence of power defending that which has been lost." Looming behind the shields are the words cited in the piece's title and whose large size and beige colors make them disappear before our eyes as we register the (il)logic of a repressive state regime.

Beatriz Cortez produces an interactive experience of the immigrant's memories and hopes. A sculpture of a small bird on a perch spits out a series of receipt-like papers containing textual forecasts, in Spanish and Kaqchikel, for and from those who have undergone their own migrations, and invites friends and colleagues to imagine a future free of systemic violence and persecution.

Camilo Ontiveros also uses language to challenge our narratives of immigration and its reception in "Refugees. Welcome Signs" (2015). Stacking dozens of "Welcome" signs obtained at thrift stores, Ontiveros renders the word "Welcome" with its dizzying repetition simultaneously powerful and meaningless, addressing the polarizing tensions around immigration policy and hospitality, a scenario the artist, himself an immigrant, claims to be close to.



Installation view of Camilo Ontiveros's "Refugees. Welcome Signs" (2015)

There are two haunting works that gesture towards gender parity with poetic rage and cheeky critique. Regina José Galindo pushes her physical and psychic limits in a series of video works that critically meditate on the oppressive social hierarchies in her native Guatemala, specifically the ways kidnapping, rape, and violently sexist language is used against the country's most vulnerable feminine denizens, often from the poorest sectors. The video piece "Perra / Bitch" (2005) features Galindo carving the word "perra" into her leg as a site of resistance to these invisible governing structures that thrive with impunity. The work resonates in Mely Barragán's soft sculpture which spells out the word "Macho" in filigree cursive and captures both the quotidian absurdity of daily gender inequity and the banality and redundancy of calling out the machismo of Mexican culture, as though it were only ensconced within that particular national imaginary and not an international point of concern and contention.



Installation view of 'Customizing Language' at Los Angeles Contemporary Exhibitions

In his piece "Bandera magonista (Magón's flag)," Rubén Ortiz-Torres offers viewers the nearly inscrutable words "Tierra Y Libertad," obscured in a painting that appears as a red monochromatic luster. The irony is not lost on the viewer, as she must struggle to find the revolutionary mantra, **coined** originally (and generally credited to Emiliano Zapata, leader of the 1910 Mexican Revolution) by the beloved yet historically obscured Mexican anarchist and journalist Ricardo Flores Magón.

Invisibility, indecipherability, and repetition tie up this exhibition which ultimately asks that we find new ways to use language, reconsider the power structures embedded within, and allow for new meanings to emerge and break down said structures.

Customizing Language continues at Los Angeles Contemporary Exhibitions (LACE) through February 14.

Beatriz Cortez
Camilo Ontiveros
LACE
Los Angeles Contemporary Exhibitions
Marcos Ramírez ERRE
Regina Jose Galindo
Ruben Ortiz Torres