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A Contemporary Art Magazine with a Focus on the Los Angeles Art Scene

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## The 4th Mexicali Biennial at LACE

**Author** / 3 hours ago



The Mexicali Biennial at Los Angeles Contemporary Exhibitions (LACE). Photo credit Dani Dodge.

## The Mexicali Biennial Turns Four

at Los Angeles Contemporary Exhibitions (LACE)

June 8th and 9th, 2018

By Genie Davis

The 4th Mexicali Biennial, *Calafia: Manifesting the Terrestrial Paradise*, opened at Los Angeles Contemporary Exhibitions June 8th and 9th, with vibrant, visceral programming beginning an event that will take place throughout the rest of this year and 2019.

The Biennial itself was founded in 2006 by artists Ed Gomez and Luis G. Hernandez, designed as a way to critique regional biennials worldwide. First held in Mexicali, Mexico; this year Gomez and Hernandez were joined by curator Daniela Lieja Quintanar and the series of exhibitions opened at LACE on Hollywood Blvd.

According to Hernandez, "In 2016, Ed Gomez, April Lillard-Gomez and I curated a show in Tempe, Arizona that examined works of art dealing with protest, activism, and propaganda during the presidential election cycle, and as an exercise, it helped us realize that we didn't want the current biennial to have an overtly political theme."

In search of a different theme, he notes that they came upon the 16th century novel *Las sergas de Esplandian* by Castilian author Garci Rodriguez de Montalvo and thought that the character of Calafia, the black queen of the mythical island of California, could set the tone for what they imagined the biennial to be.

Gomez says "April did all the research and came up with the curatorial concept including the majority of the text that was written. April has been part of the Biennial since its beginning in 2006, and for this project has taken over the role of lead researcher and writer."

Hernandez continues "We decided upon the title *Calafia: Manifesting the Terrestrial Paradise*, hoping that it would leave enough space for artists to respond to the theme by questioning and reimagining the myth of the island of California – hopefully as tangible alternatives and in opposition to the America that we are experiencing today; or by tackling issues of identity, colonialism, gentrification and displacement, water rights, immigration, and misogyny in Hollywood and the arts, among others."

And Gomez attests "I was also interested in the possibility of manifesting or creating an alternative to the negative and politically divisive rhetoric and violence we have collectively been experiencing by inviting artists to take back the myth and reimagine a new Terrestrial Paradise. When we first spoke with artists about Calafia, most Angelinos or California natives had never heard of the story," he states. "I can only imagine how much of this origin was suppressed in 20th century California history courses. I can only speculate how threatening and powerful the

idea of having a Black warrior queen who rules over the island of California could be for a racist and patriarchal society to handle.”

The opening weekend’s series of events included nine commissioned sound and art pieces, an interactive installation, and a workshop. Art included Melanie Griffin’s *A Long Way From Here Which is Where I am From*, a Black utopia imagined through ritual, plant medicine, and textiles, and Claudia Algara’s sinuous Ama-sonic Cabinet, a live performance incorporating dance and hip-hop that conjures one united California, unencumbered by walls. Performances from Mexico-City and Los Angeles-based vocalist Carmina Escobar and Tijuana-based artist Dino Dinco were also on the program.

On Saturday afternoon, artist-run collective [Slanguage Studio](#) offered a workshop and an evening of performance and celebration. [Haydeé Jiménez](#)’s *iii.tercero*, an audiovisual installation remixing field recordings taken in Tijuana, and a multi-media extravaganza from “post-apocalyptic, Afro-futuristic, Women’s Liberationist Artist Collective” [#Snatchpower](#) served up a potent mix of film, live-painting, new music, and dance.



Dani Dodge in The Mexicali Biennial at Los Angeles Contemporary Exhibitions (LACE). Photo credit: Genie Davis.

Also presenting at LACE was artist Dani Dodge, whose beautiful, haunting painted candles were arrayed on a 3 by 11.5-foot bed of gravel in the front of the gallery.

Her *Bright Lights* was an interactive site-specific installation created for the MexiCali Biennial using 42 glass candles hand-painted with iconic LA architecture that Dodge saw on TV or in Hollywood movies, including Dodger Stadium and the LAX theme building. She says these images were part of her own myth of LA before she moved to the area about 5 years ago. Through this work, Dodge re-created a common scene on LA sidewalks and streets: the remains of a roadside memorial.

The artist invited people to light the candles. "In doing so, they released their own myths of the city," she says. Dodge notes that she "believes that the reality can actually be better."

The exhibition felt church-like and holy, as participants lit candles that seemed to bring the City of Angels reverentially ablaze.

Hernandez discusses what is most different in this year's presentations from previous years. "We are making a conscious effort to work with more artists of color and of other underrepresented communities in the art world. I believe this interest was sparked by the demonstrations of the Black Lives Matter movement at the time of our initial talks in 2016, and the realization that even though we were dealing – as Latinxs and Blacks – with similar issues within and outside the art world, we were not joining forces to work together to create a greater impact and change. Because of the nature of the MexiCali Biennial, Latinx and Mexican artists have always been well represented in the project, but looking back, the participation of black artists has been scant in past biennials."

Gomez relates "I think the most significant change between this 4th iteration of the Biennial from others is that we are really focusing on feminism, identity, colonialism, gentrification and displacement while continuing our interrogation of borders. Previous Biennials were more about trying to re-contextualize or explore the possibilities of what is a Biennial and providing an alternative to the already understood and institutionalized structure."

Participation in the launch event was by invitation, with each of the curators generating a list of artists they thought it would be interesting to include.

"In addition to the performances happening in the main gallery," Hernandez explains, "we knew we wanted to have installation/video based projects in the storefront and elsewhere that attendees could view/interact with when performances were not going on. To make the program more age-inclusive, we thought of the family workshop that was held earlier on Saturday – but it was also great to see a handful of families with children showing up for the performances and staying for the entire evening programming."

Hernandez adds that for the MexiCali Biennial Launch they worked with artists from Los Angeles and from Baja California. Because Hernandez currently lives in the border region of Mexicali and the Imperial Valley, he says "I concentrated on working more specifically with the artists that participated from Tijuana and Mexicali. I researched and generated most of the initial list of potential biennial artists from Baja California working with performance, and after we all made the final selection, I was in contact and in conversation with the chosen artists, which led to what was presented at LACE."

Hernandez wants to remind readers that while the exhibition at LACE was the launch, the Biennial itself will continue with a full year of programming of art and musical events around the theme of the mythical story of California. Upcoming exhibitions and interventions will take place at different venues across California and Mexico, and along with continuing to work with the artists that participated at LACE, projects will be added from the more than 80 proposals received from the artist open call that the MexiCali Biennial announced last February.

Upcoming exhibitions include "Tijuana-based artist Mely Barragan completing the first MexiCali Biennial Artist in Residence Program together with CSUSB students. Their project will focus on the legend of 'La Reina Negra' and will speak of women's constant empowerment struggle through soft sculpture installations and other elements," Hernandez says.

“We will have a larger multi-media presentation of this project in October of 2018 at the Robert and Frances Fullerton Museum of Art, with exhibitions happening at the U.S./Mex border and inside Mexico. In the Spring of 2019, we will be finishing up the program at the Armory in Pasadena and Stepling Art Gallery at SDSU IV Campus in Calexico, Calif.,” Gomez adds.

And Hernandez relates “We’ll have a series of exhibitions, actions and events in Mexicali and Tijuana during the fall, and we are in talks about the possibility of ending the 2018/2019 cycle of exhibitions in Salinas, Calif.”





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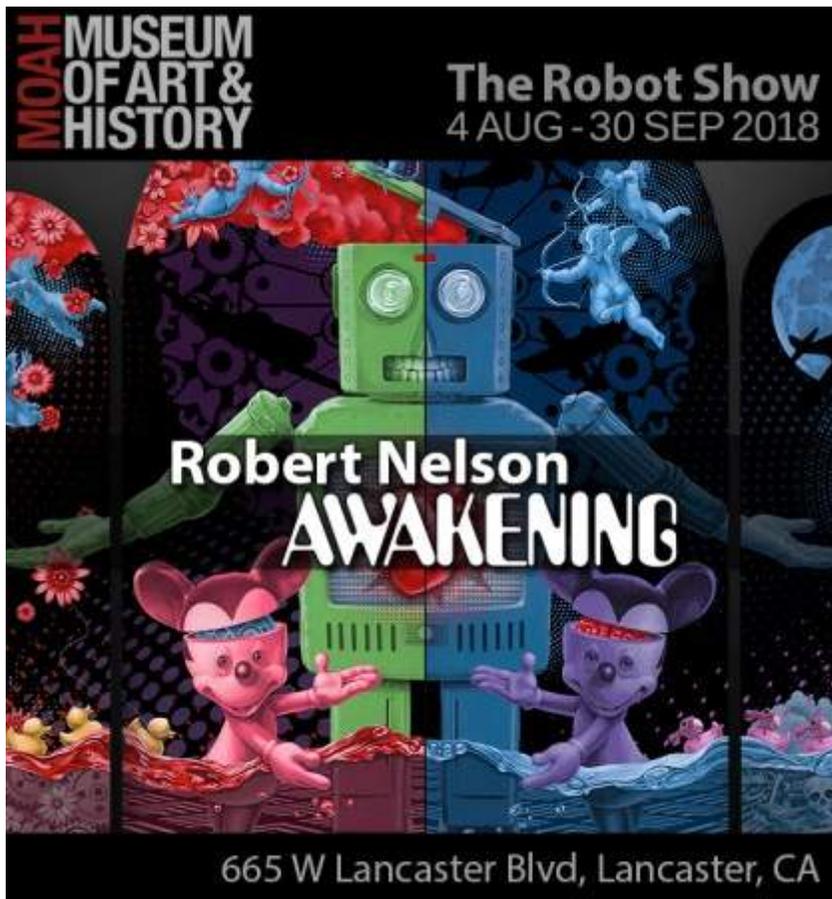
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