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At the gates: Steel and barbwire cut a swath between the US and Mexico. The art of Insite97 takes the border as its subject

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Above: **Kim Adams** *Toaster Work Wagon* 1997 VW van, used auto parts, bicycles Playas de Tijuana Photo: Terri Hughes

Opposite: **Marcos Ramírez Erre** *Toy an Horse* (collaborative project) 1997 Wood Puerta de Entrada San Ysidro, Tijuana Photo: Jimmy Fluker

Below: **Christina Fernandez** *Arrivals and Departures* 1997 Photo: © 1997 Philipp Scholz Rittermann



At the Gates

Steel and barbwire cut a swath between the U.S. and Mexico. The art of Insite97 takes the border as its subject by **Dot Tuer**

The border:

a line in the sand, a state of mind, a political reality, a cultural metaphor.

As a site, it resonates with a layering of dislocations and exchanges,

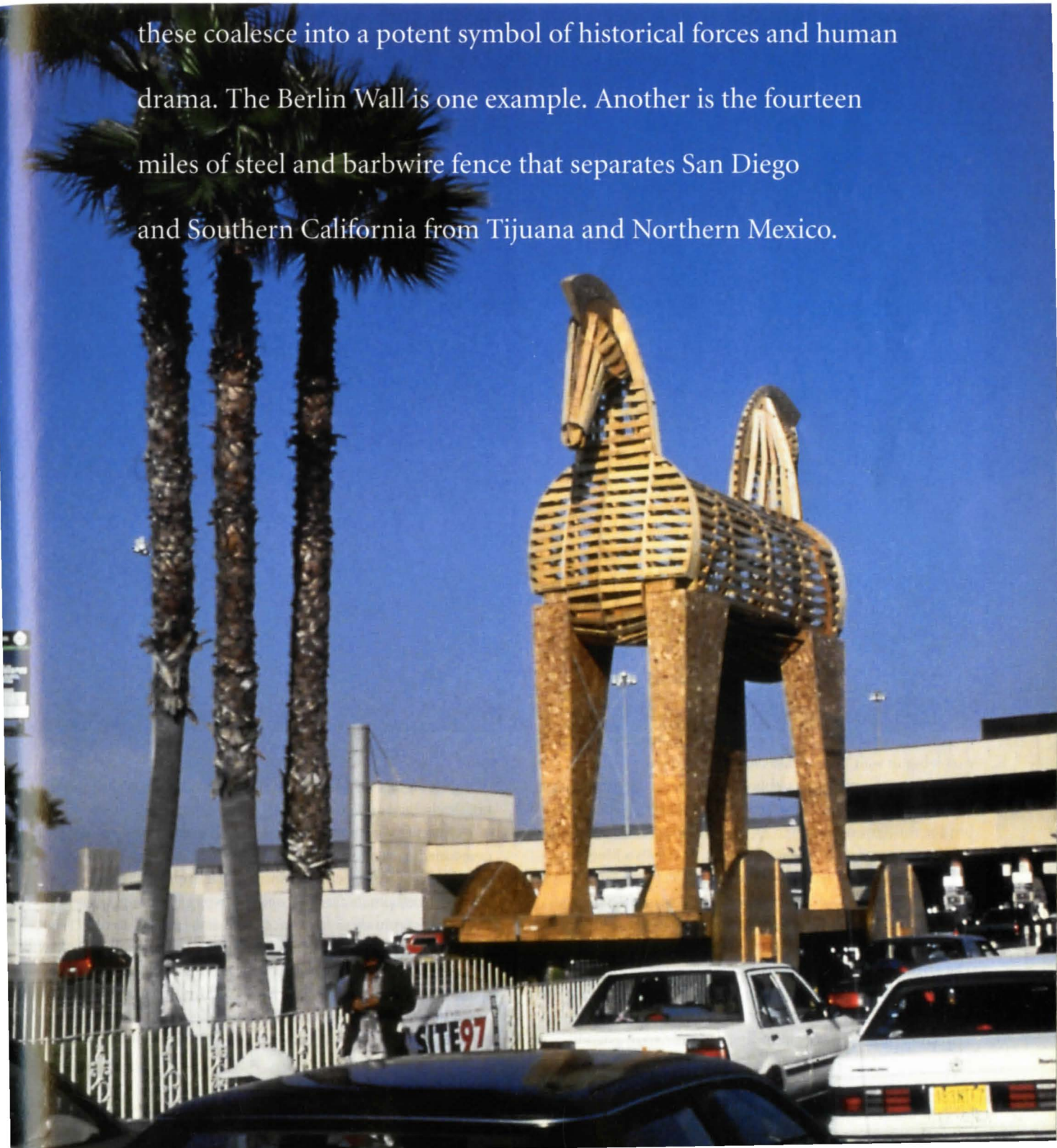
a reshaping of languages, ideologies and histories. Occasionally

these coalesce into a potent symbol of historical forces and human

drama. The Berlin Wall is one example. Another is the fourteen

miles of steel and barbwire fence that separates San Diego

and Southern California from Tijuana and Northern Mexico.



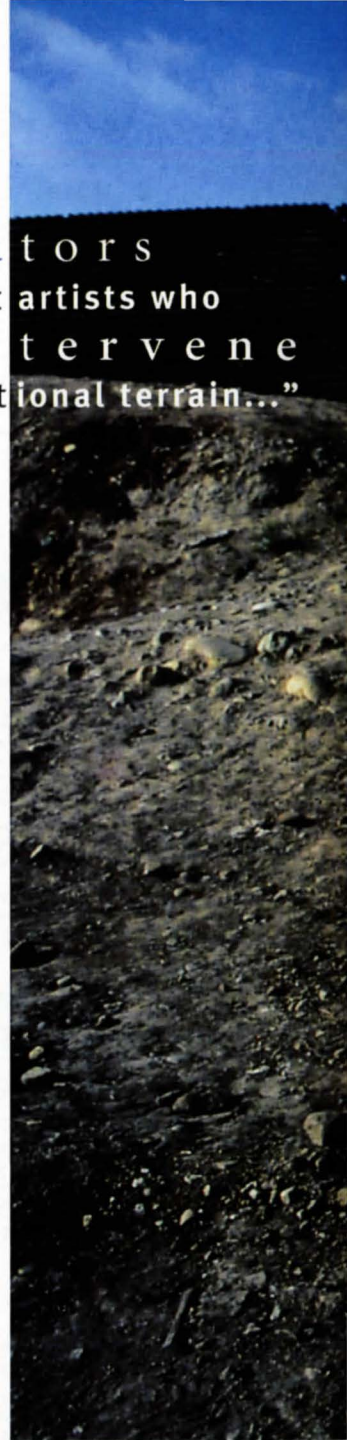
Built on sediments of colonial history (when California was a Spanish possession and Franciscan missionaries sought the conquest of indigenous souls) and nineteenth-century American expansion (gold rushes, Mexican-American wars and Manifest Destiny), San Diego and Tijuana are cities whose stark contrast belies their irrevocably intertwined existence. While Tijuana evokes a cliché Hollywood image as a dusty border town, with shanties, saloons, and vendors hawking wide-brimmed sombreros and colourful ponchos in a steamy noonday sun, it is the fastest growing city in Mexico, with immigrants from every state in the country coming to work in the *maquiladores* (branch-plant factories) for a dollar an hour or to wait to cross the border. Its stately avenues, lined with art-deco façades, are thronged with people. The Centro Cultural Tijuana, with its vast exterior plaza and cavernous interior antechamber, is a marble showcase for the city's economic and cultural ascendancy.

Long overshadowed by the Hollywood glitter of Los Angeles, San Diego offers little in the way of Tijuana's flair and funkiness. The main tourist attractions are its zoo and its golf courses. Winding roads along spectacular coastlines, immaculately manicured lawns, and cascading tendrils of hibiscus and wisteria create the impression of a carefully tended garden by the sea whose surface serenity has become a mecca for retirement living and high-tech industry. Although more than twenty percent of the population of San Diego county are Chicano (Americans of Mexican descent) or Mexican by birth, no trace of Tijuana's vibrancy and carnivalesque atmosphere disturbs the mirage of a pristine all-American tourist attraction.

From San Diego a trolley line runs from the city centre to the border crossing, forty minutes away, forming a quaint perpendicular line to the fourteen-mile fence that stretches from the beaches of the Pacific Ocean to the rugged foothills of Otay mountain. At the crossing, the highway linking the two cities is convulsed in a perpetual traffic jam. On the Tijuana side, urban sprawl nestles up to the fence. An open-air market, bursting with an indiscriminate melange of mass-produced kitsch and artisanal wares, lines both sides of the highway leading to the city centre. On the American side, the landscape is barren and desolate: a no-man's-land in which the only signs of life are border patrol cars lying in wait like vultures for their carrion prey.

Insite97, an ambitious public art exhibition featuring more than forty site-specific works, takes as its starting point this border configuration of San Diego/Tijuana. A team of four curators from Canada (Jessica Bradley), Brazil (Ivo Mesquita), Mexico (Olivier Debroise) and the United States of America (Sally Yard) worked collaboratively to select and commission artists who would intervene "in this transnational terrain, discerning or devising places of meeting, domains of dialogue, fields of reverie." The artists, chosen primarily from the curators' countries of origin—Kim Adams, Rebecca Belmore, Spring Hurlbut, Ken Lum, and Liz Magor formed the Canadian contingent—had the formidable task of responding not only to the conditions

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of public art (with its issues of audience and context) but to the highly charged and controversial border setting.

As an introduction to the visceral differences and issues embedded in the border topography of the San Diego/Tijuana region, the artists selected for Insite97 participated in residencies designed to facilitate research and the exploration of possible work sites. From this experience, each artist formulated a proposal that served as a blueprint for their site-specific projects. The artworks that emerged from the process were diverse: ranging from the installation, at the Centro Cultural Tijuana, of a giant campy Aztec pyramid decorated in kitsch by Mexican artists Einar and Jamex de la Torre to San Diego-based Louis



Betsabée Romero *Ayate Car* 1997 Wood Puerta de Entrada San Ysidro, Tijuana
 Photo: © 1997 Philipp Scholz Rittermann

Hock's subtle allusion to the free movement of water across borders with the installation of drinking fountains on each side of the border, which has transformed the picturesque stretch of sand and ocean at the Playas de Tijuana into a high-security zone.

Scattered across a thirty-square-mile area, the locations varied from recognizable cultural venues to Tijuana's shanty towns and San Diego's main-street thoroughfare. The individual works also differed in their potential to engage audiences. Tijuana-based Marcos Ramírez Erre placed a three-storey wooden Trojan horse at the official border crossing. A highly visible and accessible symbol of conflict and subversion, it was viewed by the thousands of people who cross daily from one country to the other. In

contrast, Chicago-based Doug Ischar chose a high-school gym to re-enact his personal memories of growing up in San Diego. Through the ambient sound of lock tumblers, and the closed-circuit video images from miniature cameras placed inside both a shoe box and a pair of gym shorts, Ischar created an atmospheric eulogy to adolescence that required a special trip to a local neighbourhood in San Diego and a willingness to cross over into an obtuse realm of image and sound.

While the works offered a dizzying array of approaches, their cumulative effect added up to a coherent and provocative exhibition, whose strength lay in the kaleidoscopic sum of its individual parts. Insite97 became a rich mosaic of literal and

metaphorical evocations of the monstrous fence that divides San Diego from Tijuana. Whether referenced directly, or not, the border was a ghost that haunted the exhibition. It both defined the boundaries of public space and was pivotal to the connections that emerged between individual works. In turn, the insights and perspectives offered by the works communicated a profound sense of the cultural realities of the San Diego-Tijuana region.

The two works that most acutely reflected the geographical and cultural chasm dividing San Diego and Tijuana were by artists based in Mexico City. Thomas Glassford's *City of Greens*, a post-pop performance work wrapped up in a video and objects for sale, was a golf-inspired satire on the cultural distinctiveness of San Diego's ordered, lush green landscape. The video, a genre spoof in the vein of *The Man from Uncle*, begins with Glassford's arrival by plane in San Diego, a custom-made briefcase locked to his wrist. When opened, a hole-in-one golf green, topped by an American flag, pops out. The video ends in a motel room with an encounter between the artist and a dominatrix stripper sporting astroturfed pasties. In between, Glassford wanders the streets of San Diego on a mission impossible, to decipher the mores of American culture, meeting at every turn strange hybrid golf artifacts. The video, installed in an International Tourist Information Center in downtown San Diego, was intercut with the Centre's promotional tapes of cavorting seals and surfers. In an adjacent room, golf paraphernalia was for sale as souvenirs.

While Glassford probed the banality of San Diego's leisure industry, Betsabeé Romero constructed a hybrid shrine to the cultural distinctiveness of Tijuana. To encounter Glassford's *City of Greens*, one only needed inquire about the attractions of San Diego at the tourist office. To reach Romero's *Jute Car* installation required a trek through Tijuana, in which paved roads led to dirt ones and to the ramshackle houses of Colonia Libertad, perched at the edge of the border fence. On a hillside cliff above the shacks, Romero placed an old car decorated with the intricate designs of Mexican folk art and stuffed with dried roses. Made in Mexico City and transported to Colonia Libertad, it reverberated with historical echoes that reached back in time to the appearance, on a hillside outside Mexico City, of the Virgin of Guadalupe in 1531. The first Virgin of the Americas of indigenous origin, Guadalupe became the patron saint of the poor and downtrodden, an icon carried into the Independence Wars of the eighteen-hundreds by a rabble army led by the priest Hidalgo. In decorating a car in motifs that traditionally bordered Guadalupe's image, Romero imbued a fetish object of power and speed with a centuries-old patina of miracles and spirituality.

In the context of the changing relationship of Colonia Libertad to the border—the neighbourhood was where the fence once stopped and people gathered to cross—Romero's car served as a memorial. Given the volatile history and poverty of Colonia Libertad, the organizers of Insite97 were worried that Romero's work would be vandalized within hours of its installation. Instead, the inhabitants of Colonia Libertad

organized a twenty-four-hour watch, underscoring the potency of Romero's intervention for the local community.

In an inversion of Romero's homage to the car as a feminized icon ensconced in a Tijuana shanty town, Rubén Ortiz Torres, in a downtown San Diego warehouse, created a hybrid monster from a readymade of Chicano macho culture, the low rider. Designed by Chava Munoz, the car is a rap machine in action, with hydraulic levers that detach the hood and tail-end from the main frame and swirl them in a disconcerting transformation of car parts into kinetic sculpture. To its already frenetic aura, Torres added a video projection in which footage of the car in motion in the desert setting is juxtaposed with scenes of creatures from generic sci-fi movies. Through the merger of machine and image, Torres's *Alien Toy UCO (Unidentified Cruising Object)* linked America's romance with the automobile to its appropriation by Chicanos, and America's paranoid fascination with UFOs to the fear of undocumented Mexicans as alien others.

While many of the Mexican artists drew upon strategies of pastiche and the appropriation of kitsch to politicize and vindicate the cultural differences between San Diego and Tijuana, other artists were less concerned with exposing the cultural mores of the border region than with reflecting the spatial and social disorientation engendered by the border experience. In contrast to the cultural specificity of Romero and Torres's hybrid cars, Kim Adams constructed a nomad vehicle that crossed borders and cultures. Fusing two children's bicycles, so that the front wheels and handlebars were attached to a single middle wheel, Adams left these playful concoctions in various locations in San Diego and Tijuana for children to find and adopt. A tongue-in-cheek metaphor for the border, Adams's intervention pivoted on the process by which the children who stumbled across his bicycles resolved the dilemma of their mutated function. Like the border itself, his vehicles required an inordinate degree of cooperation or, alternatively, an act of severing the bicycles in two.

In the work of Liz Magor, the omnipresence of the border was defused by a dispersal of images across the two cities. Taking hundreds of photographs of high school seniors in San Diego and Tijuana, Magor scattered large-scale negatives of the photographs in various locations, ranging from storefront windows in San Diego and vendor stands in the Playas de Tijuana to the stairwells of the San Diego Children's Museum and the hallways of a community cultural centre, the Casa de la Cultura de Tijuana. Exposed to differing levels of natural light, the images developed over the duration of the exhibition; some turned solid black, others washed out white. Enveloped in a simultaneous process of development and deterioration, these melancholic portraits marked the desire and the difficulty of bridging the impasse of the border. With the indeterminacy of their content (it was impossible to decipher from the images any cultural or racial differences) and their repetition, Magor's images became the ephemeral traces of a cultural exchange in which all that remained was a faint residue of anonymous faces.



Above: Liz Magor *Blue Students* 1997 Photographs Casa de la Cultura de Tijuana
Photo: © 1997 Philipp Scholz Rittermann

Above right: Rubén Ortiz Torres *Alien Toy UCO (Unidentified Cruising Object)*
1997 Car, video installation Photo: Sharon A. Reo

Below: Anna Maria Maiolino *There Could Be Many More Than These* 1997 Clay
Children's Museum of San Diego Photo: © 1997 Philipp Scholz Rittermann

All images courtesy inSITE97



Belmore went

in search of a Mexicanidad identity. Wandering the streets of Tijuana, she approached strangers and asked them to pose

The works that sought most overtly to represent the crossing of borders were by Brazilian artist Rosângela Rennó and the First Nations artist Rebecca Belmore. Also using portraiture, both artists located their subjects in Tijuana and then installed their images in downtown San Diego. Rennó's large-scale portraits represented Tijuana residents who had come from each of Mexico's thirty-two states. Rennó chose the people and locations and Eduardo Zepeda, a local commercial photographer, clicked the shutter to produce a curious stylistic blend of documentary verité and staged wedding photos. Mounted along an exterior wall of a downtown building, these billboard-size portraits rendered visible the invisible presence of Mexicans in San Diego and made evident the regional diversity that underlies the generic stereotyping of America's alien other.

Belmore also went in search of a *Mexicanidad* identity. Wandering the streets of Tijuana, she approached strangers and asked them to pose for a photograph in exchange for money. Settling on a young Tijuana woman, who bore a disconcerting likeness to the artist, as the subject of her portraiture, Belmore photographed the woman against backdrops of the border fence and solid colour walls. She then mounted the images sideways, like a film strip, on the marquee of an abandoned cinema. A play upon anthropologists' photographing their indigenous subjects in return for a dollar or two, Belmore's installation constructed an ethnographical record of America's alien other that was incongruous. In the context of downtown San Diego, the portraits of the woman were arresting and disturbing: mirroring the artist's own process of encountering someone (in this case an indigenous woman from Oaxaca) in which a shared history of colonialism and race was divided by the incomprehension of each other's language and culture.

While the border as a site of cultural dislocation proved a fertile breeding ground for process-orientated and nuanced explorations, the more literal representations of the border could not compete with the presence of the fence itself. Tony Capellán, from the Dominican Republic, had an installation in the Casa de la Cultura de Tijuana that evoked the brutality of the border while drowning out any sense of its complexity with the deafening noise of a circular saw moving back and forth along a long table. Another installation, by Fernando Arias of Colombia, was equally heavy-handed. He used a giant strip of sheet metal and a line of white powder to conjure drug cartels and border interrogations.

On the other hand, some of the most oblique references to the border were among the most compelling. Brazilian artist Anna Maria Maiolino's use of clay to create a profusion of simple minimalist forms was an eloquent testimony to a shared materiality of labour and earth that persists despite the political barriers. Equally moving was Chilean artist Gonzalo Díaz's *The Promised Land*. Its neon-lit words, attached to fourteen columns

located in the basement of San Diego's Children's Museum, conveyed allusions to the Stations of the Cross.

Perhaps the least successful interventions were by four artists invited back from Insite94 to create works that involved local residents in community collaborations. Patricia Patterson's "beautification" project, of a house in a middle-class Tijuana neighbourhood, suffered from a poor sense of interior design, a colonizing attitude, and a decorating flair in which American clichés of *Mexicana* style became a substitute for aesthetic dialogue. In Deborah Small's installation, a large room overflowing with dried herbs and flowers was combined with a multi-media work on the universal oppression of women to become an ahistorical and overbearing lecture on women's essentialist relationship to nature and healing. Mexican artist Helen Escobedo's attempt to link milk consumption to global economic disparity became a ramshackle and incoherent jumble of plastic cows, old milk cartoons and nineteen-fifties artifacts. Even Marcos Ramírez Erre's Trojan horse, while dramatic, was ultimately just a one-liner.

Conversely, the most successful aspect of Insite97 was the decision of the organizers to bring together artists who shared the borders of the Americas. From the Chicano Park Artists Task Force refurbishment of community murals in San Diego's Chicano Park (a site of activism thirty years ago, where the residents of a Chicano neighbourhood first occupied and then reclaimed an urban wasteland by painting scenes of Aztec and Mexican history on the concrete pillars of an interstate highway bridge that had divided their community) to Spring Hurlbut's idiosyncratic installation in the Casa del la Cultura de Tijuana that resembled ancient Aztec friezes of snakes and skulls, connections emerged between history and context. From Allan Sekula's documentary photographs of the grandiose film set for *Titanic* and the poverty of mussel gatherers in Baja California to Ken Lum's postmodern fusion of staged photographs and conversational snippets, the poignancy and ironies of the border's economic disparities were rendered transparent.

Whether locating a metaphor for the border through hybrids or dislocations, or by using photography or clay or readymade kitsch, the artists bridged the divisions of the border with aesthetic strategies formed by their own cultures as well as by the site-specificity of the region. Responding to the formidable task of addressing the border context with interventions at turns light-hearted or deadly serious, formally accessible or highly coded, the artists of Insite97 produced a collective vision that crossed not only the San Diego/Tijuana border but the North/South divide of the Americas. In the end, it was the resonances between the works and their illumination of what lay beneath surface differences of language and culture that constructed Insite97's places of meeting, domains of dialogue, fields of reverie. ■