

Chapter 13

Juan Angel Chávez's Winded Rainbow: A Vehicle for Global Discussion and Local Action

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ABSTRACT

This chapter outlines the manner in which the work of Chicago-based artist Juan Angel Chávez was exhibited at a university art gallery and served as the platform for an educational outreach program that investigated issues of immigration, place, language, materiality, and environmental sustainability within a global culture. Working closely with both an Associate Professor of Art Education and the gallery's Senior Curator, two graduate teacher candidates in Art Education generated student-initiated learning experiences based on a model of curriculum creation developed and taught by visual arts educators in New South Wales (NSW), Australia. The curator and graduate students implemented a local arts grant that enabled groups from secondary schools and a homeschool program to tour the gallery's exhibition of Chávez's work, participate in workshops in their classrooms, and exhibit their own artwork at the gallery.

INTRODUCTION

Juan Angel Chávez describes himself as “a Mexican born artist, adapted Chicago native, distinctive visionary, and spirited explorer” (Chávez, personal communication, February 24, 2015). When he was 13-years-old, Chávez moved from a small town in northern Mexico to Chicago. He made murals and guerilla sculptural installations throughout the city before developing a studio practice and burgeoning exhibition history. *Winded Rainbow*, Chávez's solo exhibition at University Galleries of Illinois State University, featured sculptural works that “relate to aspects of his experience in both Chicago's

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Juan Angel Chávez's *Winded Rainbow*

urban environment and in his native country of Mexico” and evidence “the inventiveness, scavenging skills, and spontaneous construction of shelters pertinent to survival there....” (University Galleries of Illinois State University, 2015). The exhibition included works created since 2007 and also premiered new sculptures “relating to the idea of an explorer in a new land” (University Galleries of Illinois State University, 2015). In conjunction with *Winded Rainbow*, the Senior Curator at University Galleries developed partnerships with local community-based organizations and worked with students and faculty in the University’s Art Education Program to develop and enact a subsidized field trip program for regional K-12 students. This chapter’s exploration of *Winded Rainbow*’s content, outreach, and partnerships, and analysis of student interaction with Chávez’s work (based on a model of curriculum creation developed and taught by visual arts educators in New South Wales, Australia), offers possibilities for future student and teacher engagement with the interdisciplinary nature of contemporary art practices. Such community/school/museum engagement opens dialogue and proposes actions that can bring global concerns into the educational process.

Chávez is known for transforming existing objects into thoughtful sculptures and experiential installations. Believing that items both continue to have value beyond their original purpose and carry the weight of multiple historical and linguistic associations, the artist cleverly shifts the audience’s perception of the functionality and potentiality of either a single object or a constellation of objects. Survival and adaptation are the primary themes with which he is concerned and the creative repurposing of materials—whether construction debris, broken signage, or discarded traffic cones—is central to his studio practice. Although environmental issues are not Chávez’s only area of interest, sustainability is key to the way he works. He minimizes the amount of new raw materials that his sculptures require, instead sourcing items through community recyclers, collection bins, and scavenging on the street. Following the exhibition of his large installations, he re-recycles as many of the components as possible.

The curator and graduate students underscored Chávez’s themes by enlisting the assistance of the local Ecology Action Center and Home Sweet Home Ministries to retrieve discarded materials for one of

Figure 1. Installation view of Juan Angel Chávez: Winded Rainbow at University Galleries of Illinois State University, 2015

Photo credit: Marissa Webb. © 2015, University Galleries of Illinois State University. Used with permission.



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