

A new crop of artists, inspired by both Mexico and the U.S., is enriching the Bay Area — creations range from traditional media to computerized images



LANCE IVERSEN / The Chronicle

Ana Labastida, shown in her Emeryville studio with her moth sculptures, moved from Mexico City to the Bay Area five years ago.

CREATIVITY TAKES WING

By Tyche Hendricks
CHRONICLE STAFF WRITER

The opening this week of a major San Francisco exhibit of the work of Frida Kahlo is a reminder that Mexican artists have found a home and inspiration in the Bay Area at least as far back as 1930, when Kahlo and her husband, Diego Rivera, spent a year working here.

At the same time, a crop of young Mexican artists is creating new work in the Bay Area, bringing a fresh lens to issues such as border walls and the fra-

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gility of urban landscapes. Many are forging a hybrid identity, moving back and forth between the United States and Mexico, and contributing to the cultures of both places.

"These are people living in a globalized world," said René de Guzman, senior curator of art at the Oakland Museum of California, who mounted a show of Mexican art when he was curator of the Yerba Buena Center for the Arts in the 1990s. "It enriches the cultural conversation that's happening here."

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Innovative Mexican artists enrich, inspire Bay Area

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Some of these emerging artists grew up in Mexico, others in California. Some have ties to an older generation of Latino artists in the Bay Area, while others are striking out on their own. Many have been through art school. Several are teaching art to young people.

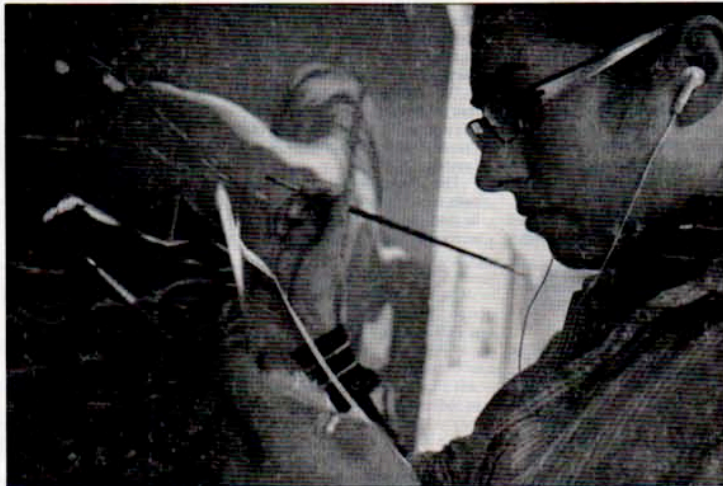
"They still have a lot of connection with Mexico, especially the urban areas," said Jonathan Chait, cultural attache at the Mexican consulate in San Francisco, who is exhibiting and promoting the work of these young artists. "But all of them are somehow involved with their communities, giving something back. . . . It's amazing the amount of creativity coming from this group."

Many of the artists are playing with performance, video, costume design and computer-manipulated images, often incorporating those techniques with more traditional media, such as painting, photography and sculpture.

Changing perspective

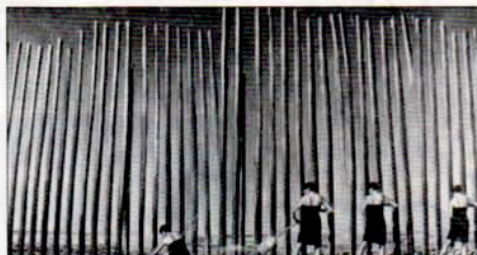
Several artists talked about the ways that being Mexican affects their views of California and how living in the United States has altered their perspective on their homeland.

"Being an artist forces you to articulate the feelings that run through your body, how you're connected or disconnected to a



DEANNE FITZMAURICE / The Chronicle

Ana Teresa Fernández, above, paints in her Marin Headlands studio. Much of her work addresses the roles of women in Mexican society and of Mexican immigrants in the United States. At left is a painting from a performance piece in which she swept the beach along the San Diego-Tijuana border fence. The painting is part of a series depicting elegant women



Works on display

The work of several Mexican-born artists based in the San Francisco Bay Area can be seen in these upcoming shows:

► Ana Labastida, June 21-Aug. 31, at Lola, 2950 College Ave., Berkeley. (510) 981-8345, www.lolahome.com.

► Ana Teresa Fernández, July 11-Aug. 9, at the Luggage Store Gallery, 1007 Market St., San Francisco. (510) 255-5971, www.luggagestoregallery.org.

► Julio Cesar Morales, Sept. 5-Oct. 18, at New Langton Arts, 1246 Folsom St., San Francisco. (415) 626-5416, www.newlangtonarts.org.

► Galeria de la Raza is showing the first of two exhibitions, June 6-July 4 and July 11-Aug. 8, in the Queer Latino Arts Festival, 2857 24th St., San Francisco. (415) 826-8009, www.galeriadelaraza.org. (The shows contain adult content, and parental discretion is advised.)

► Frida Kahlo exhibition, June 14-Sept. 28, the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, 151 Third St., San Francisco. (415) 357-4000, www.sfmoma.org.

Saturday: Kenneth Baker reviews the Frida Kahlo exhibit at the Museum of Modern Art in Datebook.

Online resources

To see a photo gallery of the art work of Ana Labastida, go to



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Julio Cesar Morales installs broken glass for a show at Galeria de la Raza last year.

concrete of high-rise buildings and city streets.

Observing the interaction of nature and built environments started early, said Labastida, 31, who came to the Bay Area five years ago to join her husband.

"The ecological crisis is so obvious in Mexico City," she said. "When the school schedule is changed and you can't go out because it's too polluted, it's very scary. . . . But knowing you are a part of this planet, it opens up the possibility of a whole new way of building cities and spaces, of feeling community."

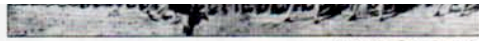
Another way

In the Bay Area, Labastida dis-

place," said Ana Teresa Fernández, 27, a San Francisco-based painter who came of age in San Diego after a childhood spent in Tampico, on Mexico's Gulf Coast. "You see the best and worst of both sides when you have the ability to cross constantly."

In a series of large canvases, Fernández has depicted elegant women performing menial tasks — ironing, vacuuming, sweeping — against the border fence by the Pacific Ocean.

"The notion of trying to mop the beach, sweep the sand, it's like Sisyphus," she said, referring to the king in Greek mythology who is cursed for eternity to push a boulder up a hill only to watch it roll down again. "People who may have skills and trades come here and end up in this menial work, cleaning hotel rooms, washing dishes. But there's strength, persistence, to get up every day and clean up after someone else. I try to humanize it a



Courtesy Ana Teresa Fernández

little bit."

The work comments not only on the way Mexicans are often viewed in the United States, but on women's dual roles in Mexican society — as sexual objects and domestic laborers, she said.

"The choices I've made, to be an artist, to be taken seriously as a woman, never would have happened in Mexico," said Fernández, who is completing a yearlong residency at the Headlands Center for the Arts in Marin and has worked with orphaned children in Mexico's Ciudad Juárez.

Contrasts at the border also loom large in the work of installation and video artist Julio Cesar Morales, 41, who grew up straddling the Tijuana-San Diego line.

In diagrammatic drawings of street vendors' carts in both cities, he examined the ingenuity of the burrito-seller working out of an

old converted golf cart and the corn-on-the-cob salesman who fashioned a pushcart of wooden pallets, old tires and other discards from the maquiladora assembly plants in Tijuana. Morales revealed these vendors, surviving at the bottom of the economic ladder, as sculptors who have fashioned something creative out of the detritus of the global economy.

Soft and harsh

Morales used a similarly clinical approach in a series of watercolors about human smuggling. He worked from U.S. border agents' photographs of people found stuffed or sewn into automobiles and other objects.

"I wanted to use a soft medium, watercolor, for such a harsh reality of people going through that humiliation," Morales said.

performing menial chores.

"This is someone's life, the person and the part of the car concealing them."

Morales, a graduate of the San Francisco Art Institute who runs an art lab for high school students at Galería de la Raza in the city's Mission District, is now making a film that explores the interaction between Mexico and the United States in the history of California's Gen. Mariano Vallejo.

Artists like Morales and Fernández follow in the footsteps of older Mexican artists who have made a home here, such as Enrique Chagoya and Gustavo Ramos Rivera. They're also informed by a generation of U.S.-born artists, including René Yáñez and Yolanda López, who activated a vibrant Chicano cultural scene in San Francisco 30 years ago, centered around the storefront Galería de la Raza on 24th

sfgate.com.

Street.

But the folkloric Mexican icons that once dominated Chicano art, including images of the Virgin of Guadalupe or the Aztec eagle, have been reconstituted in sometimes ironic ways by a younger generation. San Jose-based Mitsy Avila Ovalles, for one, plays with images from Mexican popular culture and her own story as the daughter of Mexican immigrants in her arch collagelike paintings.

Other new artists are finding inspiration in completely different territory.

One new arrival to the Bay Area art scene is Berkeley-based Ana Labastida, who studied art at the National Autonomous University in Mexico City. There she began juxtaposing photographic images of delicate leaves, branches and blossoms against the rough

IN THE BAY AREA, LABASTIDA discovered another way of relating to nature — people here hike, recycle, plant flowers in their front yards. But on the human level, she missed the deep bonds and physical warmth that linked friends and family back home.

"Contact and affection is like a little butterfly here, it's a fleeting moment," she said. "In Mexico, physical distance is much closer. You hug and kiss everybody when you meet. Here I freaked everybody out by kissing them."

Labastida said she continues to find inspiration in the crazy, overstimulating tangle that is Mexico City, as well as in the tranquil, tree-lined streets of Berkeley, and she plans to continue going back and forth.

"Sometimes I feel like the borders are fading for me," Labastida said. "I don't feel so far away."

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