

ENTERTAINMENT

# Exhibit at Union College examines issues of power, U.S. hegemony

Photos, videos, visual art make up "A Decolonial Atlas"

William Jaeger | Jan. 30, 2019 | Updated: Jan. 30, 2019 1:14 p.m.



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Javier Tapia and Camilo Ontiveros, *Travelling Dust* (video still), 2014, single-channel video, 27 minutes, courtesy of the artists

"A Decolonial Atlas: Strategies in Contemporary Art of the Americas" uses art to make a political and social construct. It wants to question and upend the usual, entrenched ideas we might have of "Latin America." The many videos here, as well as some photographs and other artworks, highlight the

representation of the underrepresented: indigenous populations, migrants, ordinary people of all kinds and Latino pop culture outside of the stereotypes pushed by Hollywood and television.

My first impression of the show was, "Power to you." And not just because of the dada tragedy of the border wall or the deeper travesty of stranded political refugees. I just happen to agree that our view of the Americas is skewed, crippled and false.

But a glance around the Nott Memorial Mandeville gallery made me reread the title and say, "Good luck with that." It can't be done in one show, not even with almost 20 artists, each with a distinctive point of view. It can't be done in 10 shows. On the other hand, at least here we have one necessary attempt.

There are some pointed successes, like Carlos Motta's pile of dozens of folded newsprint images of black handprints, dripping as if bloody, with the title, "Brief History of U.S. Interventions in Latin America since 1946." He need say no more.

Two large photographs by Martine Gutierrez show women doing quasi-fashion poses in Mayan garb. This is part of an impressive larger project called Indigenous Woman that takes on stereotypic assumptions about what the artist calls "cis, white, Western standards of beauty and raises questions about inclusivity, appropriation, and consumerism."

I wish there was more work from these artists to better understand their voices and visions. But this is a themed curator's show, and it is curator Pilar Tompkins Rivas' grappling with "continued questions of colonialism and postcolonialism" that dominates. If the theme is inspired and timely, the work sometimes resonates with the theme but doesn't hold up on its own, at least not without better context.

It is also daunting to imagine watching the many half-hour video works here. I donned the various headphones for as long as I could, staring at big screens and wall-mounted iPads, and the experience was incomplete and fractured. You need to pick and choose.

Two works, for me, stood out. First was a series of performances from the Mexican collective E.D.E.L.O. addressing problems of migrants and indigenous people. Second was Carolina Caycedo's diptych (two-channel) video, one of several works the artist has made about the damming of rivers by corporate and government powers and the effects on the people who live there. The imagery is elegant, deceptively pretty, and you slowly soak up the magnitude of this clash between the powerless and those with power.

The aesthetic nature of other videos is up for grabs. Eamon Ore-Giron's two-channel work about the displacement of a mining town to a new village built by a Chinese corporation strikes home, but it's a tedious half hour comparing the earthy beauty with a trash-strewn modernity. Other videos mostly want to show aspects of "ordinary life" in honest ways.

There is a lot here in this broad, diverse protest against hegemony. Yes, there are inevitable gaps—even the lumping of all Latino cultures, and all indigenous ones, into broad categories like "Latino" and "indigenous" can be misleading. One universal truth, though, is that all of them—all of us—were once colonized. Getting out from under the yoke of those colonizers is an ongoing necessity that "A Decolonial Atlas" attacks head on.

William Jaeger is a frequent contributor to the Times Union.