

Art Beat by Nora Ashwood: Wellin Museum exhibits looks at political art

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John Bentham | Ruth and Elmer Wellin Museum of Art at Hamilton College 'Margarita Cabrera: Space in Between,' is a room filled with desert plants created entirely from border patrol uniforms.

At The Wellin Museum

On display at Hamilton College are two exhibitions focused on the political and social themes surrounding borders and how they relate to the cultures and geography of the areas they encompass.

The first installation, "Margarita Cabrera: Space in Between," is a room filled with desert plants created entirely from border patrol uniforms. The plants, products from Cabrera's

Central America. The project establishes an outlet for these immigrant communities to preserve the embroidery and sewing techniques traditional to their homelands, as well as to share their experiences crossing the U.S. border and their life afterwards with each other, while they work, and with us, through their creations.

One saguaro cactus is covered with the names of family members and stick figures. Others illustrate mythological and biblical figures. Various nopal cacti portray gravestones and crosses. Still others portray Latin American flags, DACA cards, houses, maps and patterns of plants done in bright threads on yucca, agave and aloe vera.

All 26, of the nearly life-size replicas, “growing” out of Mexican terra cotta pots, are astoundingly realistic despite their bold patterned surfaces. The beauty and familiarity of the natural plant juxtaposed against the frightening image of these uniforms embodies the relationship between what they are and what they are made from. They symbolize the actual journey across the border where these plants are indigenous to the organic landscape and the officers who punctuate the human landscape.

According to Cabrera, “there’s a reason why it’s called the ‘Space in Between,’ because it’s a space we all know, a transitional space, whether you’ve been here for years, or somebody in your family has crossed from another country, immigration is part of everybody and it connects us all ...”

The interconnection between humans, the natural environment and manmade borders plays out in the second exhibition, titled, “This Place.” The traveling exhibition strives to portray the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and the disputed land itself in a more humane and naturalistic point of view than popular news media. Frédéric Brenner, the project initiator, writes: “when what is at stake is sharing the origin, it seems to me necessary to gather a large spectrum of individuals whose origins, passions and paradoxical and contradictory perspectives could help us grasp the unbearable complexity of this place and its voices.”

Wendy Ewald collaborates with students and adults in different communities, such as elderly Palestinian women in East Jerusalem, boys at an Israeli military academy, stall owners at a

them to photograph their daily life — their homes, themselves, their pets — and to find

The diversity of the people represented are reflected in the diversity of the photographs as Frédéric Brenner’s work proves. The figures are posed in the center of what look almost like movie sets: a few Orthodox Jewish men stand in the center of a sleek, contemporary terminal; a family portrait is taken in the middle of a herd of sheep; another sit at a gigantic, antique dining room table that spreads from one end of the room to the other.

In Stephen Shore’s photographs, layers of endless hills mirror the layers of endless jumbling homes, epitomizing how the natural world and human landscape can begin to imitate and blend together in such an ancient culture. Placed side by side, the sand dunes in “Susya” are the same color as the stones forming buildings in “Hebron,” yet the layers of graffiti on the walls somehow seem far more ancient than the ever changing sand formations.

A rectangle of 48 aerial photographs taken by Fazal Sheikh from his series Desert Bloom seeks to capture the scars humans have made on the Earth. Each piece imparts a unique narrative whether it’s a Byzantine farm, discoloration from minerals, existing or eradicated Bedouin villages which look like tiny ant hills in the sand or innumerable tracks formed by military vehicles. The result is a manifestation of all the history and life which has been carved into the land.

“This Place” is being exhibited at four academic museums: the Picker Art Gallery at Colgate University, the Tang Teaching Museum at Skidmore College, the University at Albany Art Museum and at the Wellin Museum of Art at Hamilton College where the work of four out of the 12 photographers are being shown.

Through June 10