

ORACLE AT THE ASU ART MUSEUM

By Nic Weisinger



In 2014, there was an influx of unaccompanied children from Central America that entered the United States, looking for shelter from the political turmoil of their home countries, predominately Guatemala. In the Arizona town of Oracle, residents staged the largest-yet protest against the entrance of these children. Artist Yoshua Okon visited Oracle and talked with town leaders who organized the protests and convinced them to reenact the protest from their ideological standpoint for the artists to film. The result is the video installation *Oracle*, which touches on questions of nationalism, immigration, and the slippery lines between cause and effect in Latin American politics. The multi channel installation *Oracle* was on display at the Arizona State University Art Museum until last week.

This immersive installation loops a video projected at six different locations through the gallery, causing your attention to shift from the video in front to videos to the side and behind, making the story turn as your perspective turns. Scenes of protesters reenacting the marching through the desert are speckled with images of bullet casings as well as scenes of white men climbing over rocks and promontories to plant American flags. Audio of protesters talking about people invading the country are mixed with audio of the countryside. And throughout the video, there is a futility or hollowness that permeates the actions of these lone protectors of the border.



One series of video imagery that is spliced through the otherwise banal video of men marching along a dirt road is the filming of trucks doing donuts in the desert. Sometimes as many as three large white trucks with American flags tied to the back drive a circular path, blowing up dust and spinning their wheels. At one point, a driver picks up first his pistol then his assault rifle and begins shooting out the window of the truck into the desert. A split screen follows his truck around the circle while another video shows inside his cab. He struggles to maintain control of the truck with one hand, revving up and turning around the landscape, while also pointing his weapon out the window and firing, trying not to harm himself or others. It's a perfect image of futility, uselessness, and unnecessary effort along a circular path that leads nowhere.



And herein lies the struggle with this particular influx of refugees from the south, that they are fleeing the political strife and struggles that the United States helped to create, yet these children are seen as the enemy. In Guatemala alone, the U.S. owned United Fruit Company is one of the most influential in the country. It is the largest landowner and employer, and receives tax breaks from our government and brings almost all of the profits from this corporation back to the U.S., leaving the country ripe for political corruption and instability. It is against this backdrop that many of these children flee these unstable situations at home in search of stability in the only place that they know: America.

The video ends with nine children, standing with their backs to the camera facing a wall. They all begin singing to the tune of the U.S. Marine's Hymn ("From the Halls of Montezuma"), but the words have been altered. They sing about the invasion of their land and the complicity between the CIA and the United Fruit Company. It is a chilling and poignant historical connection between the past actions of our government and their effects generations later.

If this was merely one big dig against Americans opposed to immigration, it would be heavy handed and disingenuous. Okon did ask these participants to reenact their protest, and it seems he is genuinely interested in their perspective on the situation. The fascinating by-product of the video is it's investigation into nationalism that is rampant in the attitudes and perspectives of the participants. It is chilling to see how a history of the land that included Spanish conquest and war with Mexico can be ignored so that children fleeing political strife can be seen as invaders. Okon writes, "But nationalism is so deeply internalized that it becomes difficult to see... Nationalism creates the illusion that we live in a continued and isolated bubble that is sealed from the outside. Conversations then tend to go inwards, lacking perspective. Especially when it comes to issues like immigration." Let's all hope the conversations don't continuously go in circles.

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