

Wise Blood from Oaxaca

Enterprising Exhibition at Museum of Contemporary Art Santa Barbara Explores the Juncture of Cultures, Ecology, and Contemporary Art Practice



By Josef Woodard

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MCASB 'Sangre de Nopal' gallery shot | Photo: Courtesy



With its current exhibition/project, the Museum of Contemporary Art Santa Barbara (MCASB) is presently densely packed and aswirl with collaborative sight, sound, and touch energies; multimedia resources; and sociohistorical ideas. But at the center of this thought-provoking maelstrom is a tiny insect.

That would be the tiny but mighty cochineal, found in the nopal cactus in Oaxaca and long cultivated by the Zapotec people as a source of a mythic red dye coveted for fabric and textile work. The cochineal, exported from Mexico to distant lands for centuries, becomes both a literal subject and central metaphor for a show whose title conveys its ambitious objective: *Sangre de Nopal/Blood of the Nopal: Traditional Ecological Knowledge and Contemporary Art*.

MCASB's exhibition, involving a wide array of artists and video subjects, was curated by John Connelly, Dalia García, and Audrey Lopez and is a companion piece to an exhibition at UCLA's Fowler Museum. Both are part of the large-scale PST Art project "Art & Science Collide."

In MCASB's segment, the expansive context involves education of young artists in the Oaxacan diaspora in working with the famed dye, and a corralling of artists spinning around the idea of reflecting roots and venturing into personal artistic directions.

The gallery itself plays host to an array of sensations and concepts, virtually transforming into a contemporary curatorial weaving project unto itself.

Our first impression comes in the realm of sound. The series of video monitors distributed around the gallery linked to the project by Dyani White Hawk and cinematographer Razelle Benally (Oglala Lakota/Diné) called "LISTEN" show indigenous people speaking in an array of native tongues. It all coheres into a buzzing, bustling sonic mesh in the room, alluding to the dignity and fragility of often ancient but endangered indigenous languages.

Artifacts, tools, and subtle references to aspects of the dyeing and weaving arts are well-represented. Tania Candiani shows a large wooden loom, "Zanfona," with occasional "performances" on the structure, as well as a set of grinding stones for creating the coveted cochineal dye. That dye is put to good, contemporary use in Sarah Rosalena's "Eight-Pointed Star" – its shape faintly visible in the woolen thicket. Edgar Jahir Trujillo also uses cochineal pigment and textile fiber on canvas in his evocative woven work "Radiación adaptive."

Contrasts between indigenous cultural references and Eurocentric ideas enter naturally into the exhibition's thematic fabric. Painter Darío Canul (Tlacolulokos) shifts between native Oaxacan iconography in his painting "2020" to a radically revised variation on the Renaissance tradition of depicting the crucified Christ. In this case, Christ's body is adorned with indigenous Zapotec tattoos and





"Radiación adaptiva" by Edgar Jahir Trujillo | Photo: Courtesy

In the rumpled, jungle-referential installation side gallery, Wendy Cabrera Rubio slyly addresses the frictional interface of native Mexican life and colonial invaders/interlopers in her mixed media piece "Vitality and the utopian imagination in post-revolutionary Mexico." She flies in quotes from alienation guru Kafka and has created a pillowy effigy of the dubious 1901 book, *The Blood of the Nation: A Study of the Decay of Races Through the Survival of the Unfit* by David Starr Jordan, touching on the exploitation and dehumanization of imperialist New World entities.

Another cross-historical juxtaposition takes on an organic form in the blend of ancient Oaxacan
rers and modern graffiti "street" art, in Andy Medina's boldly graphic "Zapotec March 2024."



Medina, a 31-year-old Oaxacan-born artist, perfectly embodies a cultural synthesis objective proposed by the MCASB show. Histories, landscapes and languages – artistic and otherwise – collide and collude here, with a powerful insect issuing symbolic and actual marching orders.

Sangre de Nopal/Blood of the Nopal: Traditional Ecological Knowledge and Contemporary Art is on view at MCASB (653 Paseo Nuevo) through April 27, 2025. See mcsantabarbara.org.

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