

# CONSUELO JIMENEZ

ART,  
WEAVING,  
VISION

# UNDERWOOD



LAURA E. PÉREZ AND ANN MARIE LEIMER / EDITORS

tributor to that experience for her students and colleagues. For students, the higher education experience is not just about finding a career, not always about gaining expertise; it is more broadly and effectively about finding an effective path through life. For faculty, it is not just a career; it is a purpose and a platform. Sometimes, maybe in the best of situations, the relationships between a particular faculty mentor and their students become positive, life-defining moments for both. Jimenez Underwood grew through her educational experiences, through her own determination, and through the assistance of several mentors. Her education, and specifically the way specific mentors opened her eyes to new circumstances, helped embolden her approach to teaching, to her artwork, and to her life as an artist. She is passionate, intuitive, and direct in her thoughts and interactions. Her teaching experience helped broaden and expand her worldview and enabled her to take up critical topics in her artwork and with audiences internationally. She conveyed this passion to her students, in turn becoming a memorable mentor to them. Her sometimes uncanny grasp of the student's need in the moment enabled her to help individuals who were challenged by higher education structures and practices to become successful artists and sometimes faculty members themselves. Her artworks and presentations to the public have the same transformative powers.

MARCOS PIZARRO

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## Being Chicanx Studies

### Lessons for Racial Justice from the Work and Life of Consuelo Jimenez Underwood

I knew Consuelo Jimenez Underwood before I even knew her. I went to college with her daughter, Velina, who was a powerful activist committed to the Chicanx community. She was someone who brought strength, passion, humor, and vibrant energy to the movement on our campus. It was this relationship that led me to reach out to Jimenez Underwood when I realized we were colleagues at San José State University. We met for coffee and I quickly understood that she was who I wanted to be as a thinker, scholar, and person. Her mind is expansive, her creativity is always at work, and her theoretical complexity is striking in its precision and applicability to the daily lives of Chicanx people. I invited her to a class that I was teaching because I wanted my first-year students in Chicanx studies to see who they could become. From that first lecture that I witnessed, Jimenez Underwood became my model for Chicanx studies practice.

My own approach centers racial justice teaching practices and principles, as I work with teachers, future teachers, and others committed to justice in their communities, families, and daily lives. As a former schoolteacher and someone who continues to actively work in high school classrooms, I am committed to developing and implementing a Chicanx studies practice that analyzes and unpacks the history and ongoing forms of oppression in

the United States and that models how communities of learners can engage in consistent actions that challenge, replace, and even transcend the multiple forms of oppression that dominate the landscape of daily life in this country by centering the strengths, power, and intellectual insights of disenfranchised communities. This is how I understand the Chicana studies project. Before meeting Jimenez Underwood, I had not encountered models of Chicana studies that fully and holistically embodied this approach (although many had demonstrated a commitment to these objectives). Conventional approaches to content dominated our coursework: faculty-centered classrooms relying on convention-bound readings with little opportunity for holistic student engagement or for students to learn how to actually embody racial justice insights and practices.

Frustrated by the lack of imagination and creativity in the teaching of Chicana studies in the early 2000s, I created and taught a first-year course that pushed students to find and develop their voices through artistic expression. I knew that what the students bring into the classroom and their own visions of the world they want to create are critical to Chicana studies. Our students had something to say, but they were rarely acknowledged nor encouraged to nurture their voices. This course was designed as a means to help them do just that, and Jimenez Underwood came to share her work so that students could see what fully embodied artistic voice looked and sounded like. In doing so, she walked us through her life story. She explained how severely her migrant farmworker family struggled throughout her early childhood. She did not mythologize this experience but sought for us to feel it deeply with her. Then she deftly reminded us that this reality did not define her or her family—that in fact it was how they responded to these realities that most holistically demonstrated who they are. She explained that she always knew that she and her family had things to say that the world needed to hear, and then she described the first ten-year plan she created as a child to guide her on that path. She showed us how she developed a theory for understanding the ways in which racism, capitalism, and sexism shaped opportunity for her and her family in the United States, and how she identified and nurtured the tools that she had learned from her family for thriving despite this reality. During the course of that hour, Jimenez Underwood embodied a lived theory of transformation that each of us could replicate. Through reliving her evolving life story with us, she demonstrated three essential compo-

nents to her practice: acknowledging the pain that has been wrought within the Chicana community through historical and institutional oppression; recognizing and affirming the beauty of the community in our perseverance, creativity, and ability to thrive; and using the power of applied theory as a weapon to combat oppression and live on a path of beauty.

It took me quite a while to process the power of her teaching, but as I did, I realized that this approach is always present in her artwork. I had experienced it profoundly in the first piece of hers that I ever saw, just a short time before we first met. One of her rebozos was part of a 2000 group show titled “*Imágenes e Historias/Images and Histories: Chicana Altar-Inspired Art.*” *Buffalo Shroud, Almost 1,000 Left* (1995) is an eight-foot-long weaving that radiates light from the gold threads that constitute most of the work (figure 16). The piece is comprised of one thousand small squares, each with a buffalo hoof print on it, referencing the fact that buffalo, which were the heart of sustenance for many Plains Nations and Indigenous peoples, had been intentionally decimated through both policy and practice, leaving only about one thousand of the more than 60 million that existed before “westward expansion.” The description of the piece included an infamous photo of two white men standing next to and on top of a pyramid of thousands of buffalo skulls. In the gallery, I was drawn to the beauty of the piece—it literally brought me from across the room to within inches of the weaving. I laughed as I saw the clever way Jimenez Underwood included the words “In Gold We Trust,” with the *l* in a darker thread so that it also read “In God We Trust.” Finally, I read her statement and saw the photo of the buffalo skulls and I felt as though I had been punched in the gut. That feeling was the physical manifestation of my anguish about and uneasiness with this historical reality and how it sits with me and us now, invisible but ever present. I also felt just as deeply the beauty of the shroud and how inspiring the weaving was: delicate, precise, surprising, and captivating. Jimenez Underwood was teaching us history in a way that implicated us in our present, while always reminding us to look for and rely on the beauty within us as a concrete form of resistance. She wove theory, pain, and beauty into her work in a way that left me pondering and wanting to work toward transformational practices that I could live with my own Chicana community.

I had not put all these pieces together at that time; in fact, they only fully aligned for me much later, as I spent time with her mural *Undoc-*

*umented Border Flowers* (2013) (figure 53). This piece is a 12 × 20-foot map of North America with a barbed wire slash across it; the barbed wire is nailed to the wall with spikes and represents the US-Mexico border. The border, however, is overwhelmed by huge and beautiful flowers that bring light and life to the gallery space. During one of my visits to the gallery, Jimenez Underwood told me that when she thinks about the border and the atrocities that are leveled against the Mexican and Indigenous peoples there as a result of politics and greed, she imagines transcending this reality and looks to the border-crossing flowers for a model of how to do just that. Like all of her work, this mural pulled me in, demanding that I look closely at the border and understand it for what it is: a violent and systematic assault against Mexican, Chicax, and Indigenous peoples. Her mural required me to pull back, however, in order to find and acknowledge the beauty, to understand it as a remedy, as a transformative path for our communities. Finally, this mural left me with a charge: to move forward, out of the gallery and back to my own life and community, with the wisdom she had bestowed through her complex praxis, to seek real revolutionary possibilities.

Spending an evening with a group of students from our master's program in the gallery where *Undocumented Border Flowers* was showing, Jimenez Underwood upended their understanding of what they should be doing as emerging Chicax studies scholars. She bounced around the gallery with exuberance and wonder. She spoke of her work and its evolution and what she hoped for those who visited the gallery. She also forced us to confront one of the perennial questions that so many Chicax studies students find overwhelming: What do we do? As we cover both the harsh histories and disconcerting contemporary realities of our communities, Chicax studies students and teachers can become despondent and might even surrender to anger or sadness. Jimenez Underwood did not shy away from these realities but confronted them head on. Then she took us to another level, reminding us of the power and beauty of our communities and ourselves, embodying the hope that she learned as a child from her family.

When I think back to that night, I hear Jimenez Underwood's voice and one phrase she repeated as she walked us through the gallery: "Isn't that beautiful!" I have heard her say that with excitement countless times as she looked at and shared her own work. This is her most important lesson for me. She knows and teaches that we can transform and transcend the atrocities we face only by seeing our own beauty

and then replicating and building on it. As she repeatedly plants this seed through her work, she helps me understand that Chicax studies is how we live. That night in the gallery, the students also began to understand this. They wanted to engage in knowledge production, in the pursuit of beauty. They wanted to create, and before they left, many had already begun to do that, thinking out loud about how they wanted to honor their families and even beginning to write their own poetry. In her artwork and teaching, and in how she lives in and walks through the world, Jimenez Underwood has taught me what Chicax studies must be.

I began this essay by suggesting that the power of her approach can be found in the way that she and her partner, Marcos, raised their daughter. I was unsure whether that was the best way to open this essay or if I should include it at all. But as I reflect on what Jimenez Underwood has meant to me, I continue to flash back to times I spent in her home, with her partner, their children and grandchildren, and her father. The beautiful way that she has created family and practices revolutionary love on a daily basis is the embodiment of Chicax studies that I had always sought. She lives a lesson I began to learn while spending time in a continuation school years ago. One of the teachers, Pablo Viramontes, told his recovery group that he wanted them to live one life. Pablo was suggesting that we cannot live fragmented lives that allow us to hide addiction from others and thus from ourselves. He wanted the youth to know that they could not simply put on a face of integrity for him, but that it would have to be part of who they are always. Jimenez Underwood taught my students and me that same lesson: we cannot hide from the oppression our communities have confronted for generations, just as we should not ignore the beauty and power these communities have always created through resistance. She reminded us that we could build theories of practice that are revolutionary and transformative. Jimenez Underwood lives one life: always, consistently teaching by doing in all facets of her being, manifesting revolutionary love and integrity as she builds relationships, speaks, cooks, raises her family, laughs, fights back, and weaves.