

## Interactive public art exhibit spotlights border voices

By Angela Kocherga November 17th, 2019



Searchlights shine in the night sky over the border between El Paso and Ciudad Juárez as part of the massive Border Tuner public art installation. (Roberto E. Rosales/Albuquerque Journal)

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EL PASO – Every night searchlights cut a path in the night sky over this stretch of borderland and glimmer with energy powered by the voices of people taking part in the interactive Border Tuner public art installation.

“Without people the project doesn’t really exist. It is their voice that makes the project happen,” said Rafael Lozano-Hemmer, the artist behind Border Tuner.

Internationally acclaimed Lozano-Hemmer has created large-scale interactive art installations using light in Canada, Mexico and Europe. He wanted his latest project to spotlight the U.S.-Mexico border and the voices of those who call the region home.

“People universally feel like their narratives are not being told,” Lozano-Hemmer said.

Hundreds of residents eager to share their stories have been lining up at the Border Tuner’s interactive stations. There are three set up on the U.S. side in El Paso and three in Ciudad Juárez, Mexico. Participants use dials to control the searchlights scanning the horizon high above the border fence.



Powerful searchlights gleam in the night over the border fence dividing El Paso and Ciudad Juárez as part of the massive Border Tuner participatory art installation by Rafael Lozano-Hemmer. (Roberto E. Rosales/Albuquerque Journal )

When two beams intersect, a computer opens up a channel of communication allowing individuals in each country to talk to each other. The public can hear and see the conversations reflected in the glimmering of the individual beams of light.

“This is unprecedented. The lights are impressive. The whole concept is really impressive,” Las Cruces resident Mariana Barraza said as she watched the Border Tuner in action on opening night.

Barraza embodies this borderland region that straddles two countries and three states, New Mexico, Texas and Chihuahua. She lives in Las Cruces, works in El Paso and is a native of Ciudad Juárez who crosses the border weekly to visit friends and family.

“These are intertwined communities so this is really good because everything that’s showcased is negative. We need to bring out the good. We need to show that we are together,” she said.

In the waning months of this year, residents are eager to spotlight the good that comes from collaboration after so much attention has been focused on conflict over the effort to expand the border wall. The region has also had to contend with a humanitarian crisis created by the arrival of a record number of migrant families and children seeking asylum, the mass shooting at a Walmart in El Paso that claimed the lives of both U.S. and Mexican citizens, and escalating violence and murders in Ciudad Juárez.

### **Common ground**

Lozano-Hemmer said his goal is for the Border Tuner to facilitate conversations about topics border residents want to discuss.

“I’m just highlighting that those bridges already exist. And that’s what this project does. It tries to make evident and tangible the fact that despite this wall there is a shared humanity, shared environment, shared interest in the safety of the communities,” Lozano-Hemmer said.

Each night begins with curated “activations” that feature artists, activists, musicians, poets, historians and others on both sides of the border. Discussions focus on a variety of issues from migrants and refugees, indigenous communities and LGBTQ rights in both countries.

Other events celebrate the binational culture of the borderland with performances from symphonies in each country, a Cumbia music night and cover bands paying tribute to iconic singer-songwriter Juan Gabriel and Tejano artist Selena.

“This is beautiful. This is unique. This is an opportunity to highlight our region, our two countries,” said Mario Porras, director of binational affairs for the El Paso Community Foundation, as he looked up at the beams of light and listened to the variety of voices.

Lozano-Hemmer wanted to create the Border Tuner in the largest binational community in the Western Hemisphere and partnered with the Rubin Center at the University of Texas at El Paso.

“We want to show the complexity of living in the borderlands, that many people live in both places, have relationships to both cities, both nations, both languages,” said Rubin Center director Kerry Doyle, curator for Border Tuner on the U.S. side.

### **Amplifying voices**

At a time when so many are talking about the border, the project aims to amplify the voices of those who live on the border.

“You have all the static and all these different voices, but you can actually begin to tune in and then start to clearly hear some of those voices rising out of that background noise and that really is the concept of the piece,” Doyle said.

In Mexico, Leon de la Rosa of the Autonomous University of Juárez is serving as curator. The interactive public exhibit is set up in the Chamizal Park in Juárez and in the parking lot of Bowie High School in El Paso on the other side.

The intersecting searchlights can be seen for miles on both sides of the border. The voices are filled with emotion ranging from joy to defiance and pride.

“I speak Spanglish. My favorite genre of music is rock en tu idioma,” Rodriga Rodriguez said during her Border Tuner session, referring to Spanish language rock music. The El Paso artist and musician continued, “My favorite people are people de la frontera. No soy de aquí ni de allá and I’m OK with that. I have lived my entire existence crossing the border. I consider myself a proud Mexican American, the first generation American in my family. But historically we have always been here,” Rodriguez said.

Bilingual docents are available at each activation station to provide translation. The nightly interactive public work of art runs for 12 nights through Nov. 24. While participants on the border are given priority, others can send a message via an interface on the Border Tuner website to play between live conversations.

On the opening night, a beaming Lozano-Hemmer watched and listened as people of all ages and backgrounds held conversations with their neighbors on the other side of the border.

“I’ve worked all over the world, but the sense of solidarity and focus that I’ve seen here is really encouraging. I think you guys are on to something. You have a beautiful community,” he said.