



Photo courtesy Frontera Bugalú Facebook page

BIANCA'S BORDERLAND BEAT: SINGING (AND LOVING) THE LIGHT FANTASTIC

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A .46-second blink of an eye will yield a “U.S.-Mexico border” search result list that ranges from desperate migrant children in squalid detention conditions, 154 pounds of prohibited bologna, Homeland Security lawsuits, and second to last, a thumbnail glimpse of light beams at the end of the national media tunnel vision.

That thumbnail was an invincible resistance that danced across the night sky above the Rio Grande, dismantling the dark and stubborn wall of border bigotry and crisis with art, music, and 600 hours of recorded conversations between international strangers on the El Paso-Juarez border.

In an inventive form of artistic exchange via light beams, microphones and speakers, Mexican-Canadian artist Rafael Lozano-Hemmer exhibited his coexisting Border Tuner installations at El Paso's Bowie High school and Ciudad Juarez' Parque Chamizal.

The project mingled light and sound signals in a poetic twist that crushed existing border stigmas with the purity of human interaction.

During the multi-day series of activations and forums, groups of artists, community leaders and residents from both sides gathered to express cultural bonds and ignite instant friendships on a border soil fertile in

kinship and good will.

For many, the experience was new and creatively adventurous.

But for some, like Frontera Bugalu band frontman Kiko Rodriguez, the project evoked a dormant nostalgia, awakened by memories of cross-border oneness, free of restrictive policies.

“Back then we used to cross the bridge with our instruments and we used to play with [Sonido Cachimbo,]” Rodriguez said. “There was way more interaction going on with all the musicians, all the artists, all the sculptors. Since the new policies started, everything’s just died.”

Frontera Bugalu, founded in El Paso, shared the Border Tuner stage with Juarez band Sonido Cachimbo. Each group proudly ping-ponged musical messages on border culture between a split speaker system and audience separated by the borderland’s scar of steel fencing.

“This was symbolic because now, after years of nobody talking to each other and nobody being able to work together that way, we got to do it tonight,” Rodriguez reflected. “It had to be done superficially through the lights, but I think people should know that it’s how the border used to be and that’s why it impacted me. We’re losing a lot by closing off that dialogue whether its artistically or musically.”

It was Lozano-Hemmer’s early fascination with the cultural and artistic activity of the U.S. Mexico border that helped lay the groundwork for works like Border Tuner in recent years.

As a Mexico City native who immigrated to Canada, his binational identity naturally spurred a heightened awareness of the crises he witnessed on the border.

“I knew that I wanted to do something in light of this administration’s adversarial narrative about Mexican migrants,” he said, further elaborating on how the platform was meant to encourage listening to other realities that existed in the same territory.

“What I like about the lights is they ignore the wall, they dwarf it,” he said. “It’s a tiny little piece of band aid. Walls come down. Projects like this help.”

The symbiotic sisterhood between El Paso and Juarez helped lock in Lozano-Hemmer’s decision to house Border Tuner in the southwest.

That, along with the talent of art curator Kerry Doyle. Doyle is the Director at Stanlee and Gerald Rubin Center for Visual Arts at the University of Texas at El Paso, who he credits with the diversity of the series’ activations and activities. She was joined by Leon De la Rosa and programming director Edgar Picazo during the 12-day focus on the flow of the border spirit.

In the 600 hours of documented audio, human beings laughed, cried and even spontaneously batted lashes via light beams in flirtatious engagements during literal blind dates. Border Tuner was an emotional 'bipolar project' that reconciled a territory in its natural social habitat.

"Projects like this alert them to the fact that this shared humanity is continuing and that this stupid wall will only try to stop bodies," he said. "More than anything it's just a power performance by an extinct nationalist regime that is on its last kick. The future is café con leche baby."

To learn more about the future of Border Tuner, visit their website for updates.