

UC SANTA BARBARA

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Unsettling California

Amidst the LA race riots of 1992, the Black man whose beating by white police was caught on video sent a question like a missive into mainstream media: “Can we all just get along?” asked Rodney King. In the recent exhibition “Unsettling California,” the question resurfaced in perforated letters cut from a wax-dripped paper box by Mexican-American artist Pilar Agüero-Esparza. The wax pigment is the result of melting the “skin tones” from Crayola’s “multicultural” crayon sets.

Agüero-Esparza is one of 11 artists who presented work in [“Unsettling California,”](#) in the Glass Box Gallery, co-curated by Dani Kwan and Samantha Harris, graduate students in art and education, respectively. Other artists exhibited include Debra Scacco, Devon Tsuno, Hillary Mushkin, Jessica Bellamy, Kate Saubestre, Marisa de la Peña, Margaret Laurena Kemp, Mercedes Dorame, Sarah Rosalena and Silas Munro. Three of the artists are affiliated with UCSB. [Sarah Rosalena](#) is an assistant professor of art in computational craft and haptic media. [Marisa de la Peña](#) is a recent MFA graduate of the [Department of Art](#), and [Kate Saubestre](#) is currently pursuing her MFA degree.

The exhibition was the culminating event of the 2021–22 Mellon Sawyer seminar: Race, Precarity, and Privilege: Migration in a Global Context, led by faculty members and principal investigators Kim Yasuda, Lisa Parks, John S. W. Park, France Winddance Twine and Jean Beaman. Together, the professors made up the 2021–22 UC Santa Barbara Mellon Sawyer Seminar Initiative.

Faculty provided research-based forums on race and immigration, with particular attention to California, France and South Korea. Last fall, for example, Twine, a professor of sociology, facilitated a seminar with Parks, a professor in film and media studies, and Yasuda, a professor of art. The seminar attracted graduate students from seven different departments, across the arts, humanities and social sciences.

Participants in Twine, Parks and Yasuda's fall quarter of the year-long seminar recently launched both a podcast and exhibition, inviting expert guest speakers from diverse fields, in-person and virtually, to explore dominant migration narratives such as the "American Dream" and the "California Dream."

"Our seminar focused on the relational experiences of Asians (Chinese, Japanese), Blacks, White, Latinx and Native Americans related to race, labor and migration in California," Twine said. Twine has been teaching in the UC system for two decades and said the opportunity to work with Parks and Yasuda was the most rewarding research and co-teaching collaboration that she has experienced.

"What made it so rewarding," she said, "is the ability to collaborate across disciplines with scholars with whom I have deep respect but with whom I had never co-taught."

Through assigned readings, film screenings and invited guest talks, seminar participants were guided in reflecting on and situating their family's migration histories within the cultural history of other groups in California.

The seminar ultimately led to the podcast, "The Deferred Dream," published on [Buzzsprout](#) and the "Unsettling California" exhibition. Both co-curators, Kwan and Harris, participated in the seminar with Twine, Parks and Yasuda.

"Because we value community outreach and the concept of a university without walls, we produced a podcast based on interviews with scholars who visited our seminar," said Parks, who is the director of Global Media Technologies & Cultures Lab.

Parks also said she thought it was vital for faculty and students to have opportunities to learn about complex histories of race, ethnicity and migration in the state of California. "Our seminar last fall assembled methods from sociology, art, film and media studies, and social history to explore American Indian, Black, Mexican, and Japanese migration experiences in California," she added.

Many of the discussions provided context to engage with the art presented in “Unsettling California.” Yasuda explained that the exhibition brought together diverse contemporary artists from across California, including UC Santa Barbara faculty and graduate students. “These artists powerfully excavate unsettled California land histories,” Yasuda said.

Kwan emphasized they wanted to work with artists who questioned the persistent presence of colonial ideologies, structures and policies still present in the state.

Through learning about the artist interactions with their race or land history, visitors are invited to self-reflect on their own personal histories.

“We are offering visitors an opportunity to evaluate their own place in the settler colonial systems that have shaped this state to reveal our history and what is our role in that history,” Kwan said. “We wanted to try and bring together these important stories, conversations and marks that people can spend time with.”

To see more art and exhibition images and to read the gallery wall text, check out the article by Minyi Jiang, [“Unsettling: Confronting California’s Past Through Art.”](#)

About UC Santa Barbara

The University of California, Santa Barbara is a leading research institution that also provides a comprehensive liberal arts learning experience. Our academic community of faculty, students, and staff is characterized by a culture of interdisciplinary collaboration that is responsive to the needs of our multicultural and global society. All of this takes place within a living and learning environment like no other, as we draw inspiration from the beauty and resources of our extraordinary location at the edge of the Pacific Ocean.