



PROJECT MUSE®

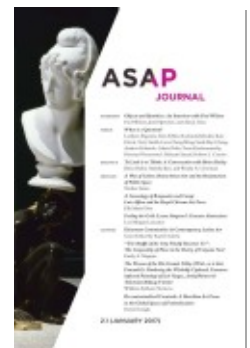
The Picasso of the Rio Grande Valley (Wait, or is That Foucault?): Pondering the Wickedly Ciphered, Frontera-Inflected Paintings of Izel Vargas, Artist/Painter & Television Kidnap Victim!

William Anthony Nericcio

ASAP/Journal, Volume 2, Number 1, January 2017, pp. 183-197 (Article)

Published by Johns Hopkins University Press

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1353/asa.2017.0022>



➔ *For additional information about this article*

<https://muse.jhu.edu/article/649714>

William Anthony Nericcio

THE PICASSO OF THE RIO GRANDE VALLEY (WAIT, OR IS THAT FOUCAULT?):

PONDERING THE WICKEDLY
CIPHERED, FRONTERA-INFLECTED PAINTINGS
OF IZEL VARGAS, ARTIST/PAINTER &
TELEVISION KIDNAP VICTIM!

One can dream or speculate about the geo-techno-logical shocks which would have made the landscape of the psychoanalytic archive unrecognizable for the past century if, to limit myself to these indications, Freud, his contemporaries, collaborators and immediate disciples, instead of writing thousands of letters by hand, had had access to MCI or AT&T telephonic credit cards, portable tape recorders, computers, printers, faxes, televisions, teleconferences, and above all E-mail.

I would have liked to devote my whole lecture to this retrospective science fiction.

I would have liked to imagine with you the scene of that other archive after the earthquake and after the “après-coups” of its aftershocks. This is indeed where we are.

—Jacques Derrida, *Archive Fever*¹

WILLIAM A. NERICCIO is professor of English and Comparative Literature & Chicana/o Studies and serves on the faculty of the Center for Latin American Studies at San Diego State University, where he is also Director of the cultural studies Master's program MALAS. He is the author of *Tex[t]-Mex: Seductive Hallucinations of the “Mexican” in America* (2006), *The Hurt Business: Oliver Mayer's Early Works Plus* (2008), and *Homer From Salinas: John Steinbeck's Enduring Voice for the Californias* (2009). He is also the curator of the traveling text-image exhibition entitled “Mextasy.”

We begin at the border,
the U.S./Mexico
border—a land filled
with quaint and tragic histories.²

The Death of Artemio Cruz

≈ 7

Yesterday you did what you do every day. You don't know if it's worthwhile remembering it. You only want to remember, lying back there in the twilight of your bedroom, what's going to happen: you don't want to foresee what has already happened. In your twilight, your eyes see ahead; they don't know how to guess the past.

Figure 1.

Quote from Carlos Fuentes, *The Death of Artemio Cruz* (Fondo de Cultura Económica, 1962), 7.

And we turn at once to a Texas ex-patriot, the artist Izel Vargas, born in Alamo, Texas (did that cognomen happenstance augur something about Vargas's future as well?) whose wondrous coded tapestries (ok, they are paintings) retell the semiotic, cultural, and political histories of the borderlands with color, wit, vision, and cunning.³ One could speak of Izel's work as hieroglyphic and could come real close to the soul of his oeuvre. But perhaps

“

He's 'merican after all, albeit a Tejano, which, in my view, is as American as you can get.

”

that phraseology, the metaphors of unreadable orientalist texts, renders his symbols and ciphers too precious, too exotic. He's 'merican after all, albeit a Tejano, which, in my view, is as American as you can get. In any event, there are certain things you have to understand to begin the hermeneutic adventure that awaits you if you are new to Vargas's work. And the first stop on our semiotic expedition takes us to the land of children's animated entertainment and to the figure of Dora the Explorer.

DORA, NOT FREUD'S "DORA," AT LEAST NOT TOTALLY

The man has a thing for *Dora the Explorer*. Izel Vargas, the painter, from *Tejas*, has a repetition compulsion, populating multiple canvases over the years with the tiny, bilingual animated television star. These repeated sightings are true, obvious, and unavoidable—but ultimately their greatest value is that they are curious. Peculiar. Even disturbing.

So here in the opening movements of this brief cultural studies odyssey, this fragment from the pages of American art history, we instigate an enquiry that must be grappled with owing to a peculiar motif in the body of Izel Vargas's paintings: why does Dora turn up time and again in the paintings of an artist from Texas's lower Rio Grande Valley?

Dora is there in Vargas's *P.F.D.* (Fig. 2), recast as a handless (demanitated?) border patrol-costumed figure, uncanny and haunting with a melting Fudgsicle™ head—the ghostly outline of saintly hands clasped (some forgotten Catholic martyr no doubt—the ghosts of her castrated ones?) praying for something or someone unseen.



Figure 2.
Izel Vargas, P.F.D. 2014. Mixed media. Image courtesy of the artist.

And there she is again, in his mixed media piece from 2008, *The Business of Illusion* (Fig. 3), where she once again materializes: her arms now cut off mid-elbow, her face now elided-become-screen for a Roy Lichtenstein-esque comic book purloin/tip-in all grafted onto the canvas with seeming random intent (but nothing is random in our Vargasian universe—think Borges, with cartoons).

And finally, in *Estados Jodidos* (Fig. 4), his masterwork from 2007 that I am lucky enough to have collected and own, Dora turns up again: this time as some Jesus-in-metamorphosis figure, the Son of God recast, the sacred heart of Jesus



Figure 3.
Izel Vargas, The Business of Illusion, 2008.
 Mixed media. Image courtesy of the artist.



Figure 4.
Izel Vargas, detail from Estados Jodidos, 2007. Image courtesy of the artist.

reimagined, with that same Dora Fudgsicle™ face that haunts over a decade of the Tejano artist's canvases.

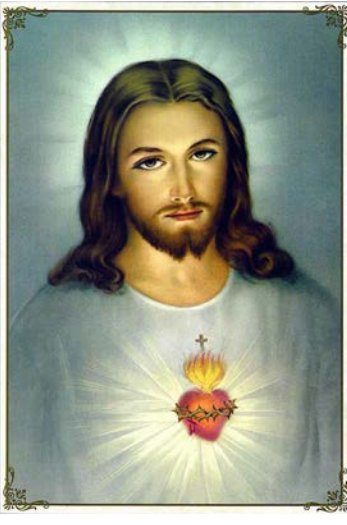


Figure 5.
The Sacred Heart of Jesus. Public domain/ fair use.

In this painting, Jesus *does* make a cameo, but it is not as the heralded sacred heart Jesus (Fig. 5), but as a 1950s housewife, Harriet of *Ozzie and Harriet* fame, mashed up as the Virgin Mary's first born (Fig. 6).

I have tried to come up with various ways to interpret the ciphered universes of Izel Vargas, including his aforementioned Dora obsessions. In my recent study *Tex[t]-Mex: Seductive Hallucinations of the "Mexican" in America*, I conjured up the concept of "Xicanosmosis," a mouthful of a word that fuses the signifying spheres of the always-evolving term "Chicano" with the notion of "osmosis" you picked up in your high school biology class:

"Osmosis: 1867, Latinized from *osmose* (1854), shortened from *endosmosis* (1830s), from *endosmose* "inward passage of a fluid through a porous

septum” (1829), from French *endo-* “inward” + Greek *osmos* “a thrusting, a pushing,” from stem of *othein* “to push, to thrust,” from PIE **wedhe-* “to push, strike” (source also of Sanskrit *vadhati* “pushes, strikes, destroys,” Avestan *va-daya-* “to repulse”).⁴

In *Tex[t]-Mex* I was trying to talk about the way literature and other related sister-arts evolve and form along the U.S./Mexico border, where the syncretic bleeding together of cultures through the “porous septum”—or, in other dictionaries, “the semi-permeable membrane”—seems the perfect way to discuss textuality in various media at the *frontera*.⁵ The neologism Xicanosmosis emerges as my shorthand way of talking about what happens when the cultures and histories of the United States and Latin America combine, clash, fuse, and frolic. Izel Vargas’s amazing paintings embody the odd, symbiotic dynamics of xicanosmosis in ways that my book just can’t match. Take his *Purgatorio*, pictured here (Fig. 7):



Figure 6.
Izel Vargas, detail from *Estados Jodidos*, 2007. Image courtesy of the artist.

and frolic. Izel Vargas’s amazing paintings embody the odd, symbiotic dynamics of xicanosmosis in ways that my book just can’t match. Take his *Purgatorio*, pictured here (Fig. 7):



Figure 7.
Izel Vargas, *Purgatorio*, 2008. Image courtesy of the artist.

It's a Xicanosmotic mess with symbols that evoke 1950s line-art advertising and incorporating an attempt by NASA to communicate with aliens, Mexican pulp comics, Dora (*por supuesto*), South Texas icehouse signage, and Mexican Catholic standbys: *purgatorio*—the place the nuns in Laredo, Texas, taught me we go (for three days, three years? three millennia) to burn away our sins—*Holy Dante, Batman*.

And that does not even begin to talk about the anthropomorphic teeth that walk through Vargas's canvases (Fig. 7 and Fig. 17)—which, as Vargas confesses to Nancy Moyer, are the result of “a lot of dental surgery” and a “baseball accident that was very traumatic when I was 11 [that] left me looking like that tooth.” It is not without a certain poignancy that Vargas concludes by calling the era “a traumatic part of my life; it's probably a self portrait without thinking about it that way.”⁶ Derrida's comments in *Archive Fever*, regarding the specter of a psychoanalysis that would have developed in the age of the internet, can help us to parse the hidden hieroglyphs proxying for autobiography in Vargas's world. But it is not just autobiography—it is history as well, and a history sensitive to the oscillations of institutions and cultural practices on both sides of the Border. Hence the Foucault cameo above in my article's title: that old bathhouse habitué knew a thing or two about institutional historiographies, and it is that direction that Vargas's canvases tilt. They are as much the story of Izel Vargas as they are a kind of recapitulation of what it's like to grow up in South Texas—to grow up in South Texas with antennae attuned to warped and warping broadcasts transmitted from both sides of the border.

And Dora? What does she mean? The clues are right in front of our eyes: Dora wears the costume of the border patrol, but she is also the victim of extreme violence, her bleeding stump evoking the legendary signage to be found in Mexican Catholic Churches. Ok, it's not signage, but statuary—not neon, but sculpture and painted terra cotta adorned with more blood than a Quentin Tarantino movie. Dora emerges in this series of canvases as a Mexicanesque patron saint, a bleeding Virgin Mary proxy whose statues (were Vargas to remake her in sculpture, like Jeff Coons, with whom he shares a ton) would probably have eyes that shed tears.

The final word on Dora and Vargas comes from the wily Izel himself in a confession to me via email:

Dora the Explorer came about when I purchased a Dora *paleta* (ice cream confectionary) from a kid and his mom in an ice cream truck. I was attempting to make a video for an exhibition called “South Texas Heat.” I thought why not let the ice cream bar melt in the sun, to see how long it would take. In the process, I was struck with the idea that I was melting away this little manufactured Latina. She’d already infiltrated the American household and could easily be recognized by kids and adults alike. It felt odd as though I was being a mean older brother (as my little brother Rogelio loved Dora as a kid), but it worked. I could relocate Dora to the border, or to anywhere (and nowhere), and have her now ‘explore’ this place. She became more than the explorer. She became the Exploited. Sometimes the *MataDora*. Sometimes the *maquilaDora*. Sometimes *La Mígra Dora*. It was as though I made a paper doll of her, each time recontextualizing her space and how she explored it.⁷

ESTADOS UNIDOS. ESTAMOS JODIDOS. ESTADOS JODIDOS

When I saw *Estados Jodidos* (Fig. 8), I knew it was going to be the centerpiece of my traveling Pop-up exhibition, which goes by the name of “Mextasy.” And now, some thirty exhibitions, lectures, presentations, and installations later, it remains one of the most popular items in the show.⁸

I was never trained in art history, so my musings are those of a collector rather than an expert in twenty-first century art, more the hunches of a curator who has had the chance to talk to scores of people about Izel’s work and to Izel a few times over the years. So here are some quick thoughts on the painting—a masterwork that emerges as a veritable Hieronymus Bosch of South Texas ontology.

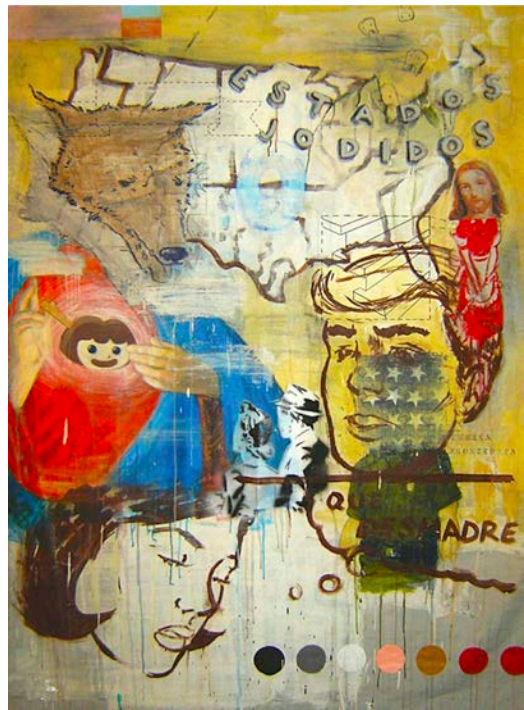


Figure 8.
Izel Vargas, Estados Jodidos, 2007. Image courtesy of the artist.

A MAP THAT MATTERS

If you think Vargas's map of the United States looks funny, that's because it is: in "Estados Unidos" the U.S. is not divided into states. Instead, the nation's body is cut up into Border Patrol zones (now officially known as division



Figure 9.
Izel Vargas, detail from Estados Unidos, 2007. Image courtesy of the artist.

of U.S. Customs and Border Protection, itself a sub-division of The Department of Homeland Security). If I am reading this right, Vargas's painting reveals the extent to which patrolling sectors re-map the existential contours of Mexican-Americans growing up in the United States. In particular, it also suggests that the psyches of the undocumented are even more tattooed by these seemingly odd, unfamiliar markings, which might

be thought of as arbitrary boundaries wrought by bureaucrats but are actually more akin to military operation zones impacting the lives of all within those strange new borders.

Here's a map (Fig. 10) that I borrowed off an anti-immigrant website⁹ (there's some irony in this).



Figure 10.
Customs Border Protection Sector Map. Wiki image; public domain.

BIG HEADED MIGRA

The oversized Gringo-head affixed to the armless body (Dora inside the Mardi Gras-esque mask) is easy to parse. Like some uber-Gringo, this sentinel of the border oversees the pathways of the various Border Patrol sectors. The god-head knows all and sees all—though I also think it’s a pretty good likeness to Fred Jones, the straight man (and resident uber white man) on the *Scooby-Doo* animated television series.

OF ICE AND ICE

The ghostly “O” here is a truncated, elided “o” from the Spanish word, “*hielo*.” A feature in several paintings by Vargas, the *hielo* signage is a commonplace from Alamo to McAllen to Laredo—it is a floating signifier of the Tejano borderlands. You have to remember how hot it gets in South Texas, and then the ubiquity of this sign, touting corner stores and Texas icehouses (that sell ice and beer) that prowls Vargas’s (and my) conscious and unconscious, becomes easier to understand. But then there is I.C.E., the acronym, the shadow term for the *migra* and the border patrol, the offices and officers of U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement—the ghostly “O” hovering over the body of the U.S. reminds those beneath its eye that one is already always, always already under surveillance by its armed panopticonic border agents.



Figure 11.
Izel Vargas, detail from Estados Jodidos (2007).
Image courtesy of the artist.



Figure 12.
Izel Vargas, detail from Estados Jodidos (2007).
Image courtesy of the artist.

“

“Estamos Jodidos” is one of the more common epithets you will hear from Spanish-speakers on both sides of the Rio Grande—literary translated, it means “we are fucked.”

”

WORD PLAY

Estados Unidos is the name of the United States in Spanish. “Estamos Jodidos” is one of the more common epithets you will hear from Spanish-speakers on



Figure 13.

Izel Vargas, detail from Estados Jodidos (2007). Image courtesy of the artist.

both sides of the Rio Grande—literary translated, it means “we are fucked.” Vargas purposely confuses the two phrases, or, better put, fuses the two phrases, turning his epic tapestry into an allegory that asks us to re-imagine the United States as the Fucked Up States, or, perhaps, the states that fuck up all the folks that live within, with-

out, and near its borders. It’s also a joke—and a pretty funny one at that for code-switching bilinguals hip to Vargas’s game.

Izel and I have talked and written about the consequences of this naming. I will let you listen in:

What was funny was that no one knew what ‘Estados Jodidos’ meant, except for the occasional Spanish-speaking passerby, which happened to be the Latino workers that were employed near and around the storefront. When I was asked about it, the conversation quickly turned into one about immigration in North Carolina [where Vargas had the painting on display]. Some of the surrounding counties had been passing laws that didn’t allow workers to hang out in certain areas, limited taco truck vending, and gave cops the power to detain for ICE officials anyone they identified as illegal. Most Latino immigrants didn’t understand

these laws mainly because of a language barrier, which in turn added more mistrust that had already permeated within the community. This is how ‘Estados Jodidos’ came to be.¹⁰

CONCLUDING SOLILOQUY: OR HOW IZEL VARGAS CAME TO BE

Izel Vargas has been molested by television; comics have assaulted him, leaving their inky trace on everything he touches. There’s more: he is a victim of the nefarious workings of *xican-osis*; born between and within the borders of the United States and Mexico, his work shouts of the alchemical magic to be found within and without these bizarre cultural spaces. You look at a work like *Valley Girls Make Me Cry* (Fig. 14) or a piece like *Things Can Only Go Wrong* (Fig. 15) and some melanin-deficient art historian in the crowd might shout out knowingly (dear reader, use Thurston Howell’s accent from *Gilligan’s Island* here), “Pish-posh, of course we see the influence of Roy Lichtenstein here.” And said Art Historian, would be right (I made the same allusion above)—but there’s more.

Where Lichtenstein’s comic book-inspired paintings evoked a hyper-perfect, hyper-stylized dimension of control and measured cadences (the blown up half-tone dots like rows of actuarially-inclined marshaled troops), Vargas’s world is much more ephemeral, much more haunted and haunting—like some victim of semiotic abuse, the contours of the border have traced his psyche with bizarre ideographs so that when they emerge from his hand onto the canvas, his ciphered scribbblings bring back odd voices from the other side.

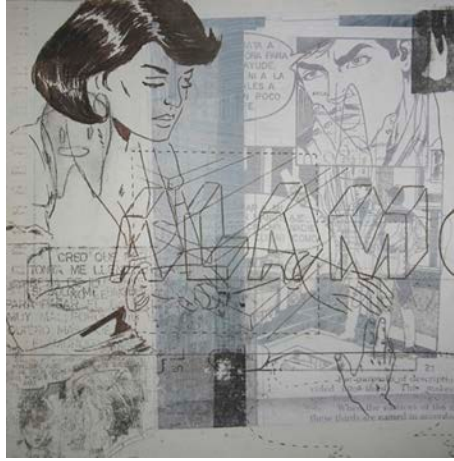


Figure 14.
Izel Vargas, Valley Girls Make Me Cry, 2009. Image courtesy of the artist.



Figure 15.
Izel Vargas, Things Can Only Go Wrong, 2009. Image courtesy of the artist.



Figure 16.
 Roy Lichtenstein, *Sweet Dreams, Baby!* Published in *11 Pop Artists, Volume III* (New York: Original Editions, 1965). Screenprint, 35 5/8 x 25 9/16" (90.5 x 65 cm). Image courtesy of Art Resource. © Estate of Roy Lichtenstein.

You may have seen a film called *Poltergeist* back in the day. If you have not, it features an eerie scene where a serene, pretty blonde girl is sucked up into an otherworld, a netherworld on the other side of a T.V. screen. (More recently in fiction, Haruki Murakami has treated this in *After Dark*). And Vargas has been there: like some kind of *Alicia in Wonderlandia*, he has imbibed from strange bottles and fallen down strange orifices (flash your synapses with some shots from *Being John Malkovich* here, Spike Jonze's brilliant Borgesian epic) and has come back to our world bowdlerized, discombobulated.

In this regard, his *Dora the Explorer* fetish is revealed as an exercise in self-portraiture. When she appears in his work, amputated or re-imagined with anime-eyes, she is Izel, wounded, marked, abused, and alive. And like Izel, she is "Mexican," with the scare quotes, with the scary scare quotes " ". Here punctuation works like a scar or a tattoo

showing that living, sentient beings can be touched forever by their facsimiles on the screen, their simulacra in the pages of a comic book, and more. Amputated eyes—the sign that reveals the touch of semiotic pathology—emerge as a motif in Vargas' *oeuvre*.

I grew up entranced by Warner Brothers cartoons on Saturday mornings in Laredo, Texas; I grew up again with Lorenzo and Sophia, my two children, watching *Dora the Explorer*, *Sponge Bob Squarepants*, and *The Powerpuff Girls*.

I also grew up on the border. So I see things that others may not see, and as a critic, I am paid to share the substance of my sightings.

When I look at the uncanny, provocative, comic, violent canvases touched by the eyes and hands of Izel Vargas, the superficial and subterranean workings of the Mexican-American border come to life. All the players are there: Jesus, Taco-trucks, *La Migra* (the border patrol), *Santos* (saints), *los fonnies* (comics),

elados (popsicles) are all there, clear and recognizable. But they are deformed, deranged, re-visited, re-purposed, damaged, and perverse.

Izel Vargas's canvases come from an othered world, our own *and* not our own—something *more* and something *else*. Children's dreams become nightmares and *las fronteras de la America* echo round the chambers of our eyes as if retrieved from Edgar Allen Poe and channeled through the corridors of Remedios Varo. Few other artists (perhaps John Rechy with *City of Night*; perhaps Americo Paredes with *George Washington Gomez*) have so memorably recast the dusty byways of Texas with such vivid tenacity, with such eerie and uncanny artistry.

Our eyes touch the vortex of Vargas's canvases and we come away transmogrified—as if we've been pulled into an alternative universe, a cosmic barrio of the South Tejas soul from which there is no exit.



Figure 17.
Izel Vargas, La Gran Pendejada, 2007. Image courtesy of the artist.

¹ Jacques Derrida, *Archive Fever: A Freudian Impression*, trans. Eric Prenowitz (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995), 16.

² They are seemingly endless, the number of works that document the violent histories along the U.S./Mexico border—three useful examples include Americo Paredes, *With His Pistol in His Hand: A Border Ballad and Its Hero* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1958); Rachel St. John's *Line in the Sand: A History of the Western U.S.-Mexico Border* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2011); and Kelly Lytle Hernandez's *Migra! A History of the U.S. Border Patrol* (Oakland, CA: University of California Press, 2010). For a journalist's take on the same phenomena, see Rebecca Onion, "America's Lost History of Border Violence: Texas Rangers and civilian vigilantes killed thousands of Mexican-Americans in a campaign of terror. A century later, will the state finally acknowledge the bloodshed?" *Slate Magazine*, May 5 2016, http://www.slate.com/articles/news_and_politics/history/2016/05/texas_finally_begins_to_grapple_with_its_ugly_history_of_border_violence.html).

³ From the author's website (once called Pocholandia, now called Izelvargas.com): "Izel Vargas was born and raised in the Rio Grande Valley of South Texas. A native of Alamo, Texas, his upbringing along the US-Mexico border plays an important role in his art making process. Vargas received his BFA in 2004 from the University of Texas, Pan American, and his MFA from the University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill in 2007. As an arts educator, he has worked with college students, at-risk youth, and taught courses at public art centers to both children and adults. Vargas has been invited to lecture at several notable institutions including Duke University, the Mint Museum in Charlotte, NC, and Vanderbilt University in Nashville, Tennessee. The artist currently resides in South Florida and is an Artist in Residence at the Armory Art Center in West Palm Beach, Florida," <http://izelvargas.com/artwork/3216926-About-the-Artist.html>.

⁴ Osmosis, noun, from the *Online Etymological Dictionary* (<http://www.etymonline.com/index.php?term=osmosis>).

⁵ In my new book *Eyegasm/Eyegasm: Permutations of Subjectivity in the Televisual Age of Sex and Race*, currently undergoing revisions, I use *xicanosmosis* to describe the odd connections between Paul Reubens and Roberto Gómez Bolaños, between Pee-wee Herman and Chespirito, children's entertainers who are transvestite men dressed not as women, but as children (in Pee-wee's case, a man dressed as a child masquerading as a man).

⁶ Nancy Moyer, "SURFACE TREATMENT: 'Exiles' by Izel Vargas," *The Monitor*, September 4, 2009, http://www.themonitor.com/life/valley_life/surface-treatment-exiles-by-izel-vargas/article_2771d84a-e832-5fbc-aa1b-2682c9e4004f.html

⁷ Personal email exchange with Izel Vargas, September 22, 2016.

⁸ For more on *Mextasy*, go to the blog archive of its showings at <http://mextasy.blogspot.com>. Also see Fredesvinda Rojas, “The Mextasy of William Nericcio dashes stereotypes and builds ‘mexicanidad,’” *Borderzine*, November 8, 2014, <http://borderzine.com/2014/11/the-mextasy-of-william-nericcio-dashes-stereotypes-and-builds-mexicanidad/>.

⁹ <http://www.rightsidenews.com/wp-content/uploads/2015/03/BPsectormap.jpg>, in entry “CBP Border Security Report, Week Ending July 25, 2015, including Drug Trafficking,” <http://www.rightsidenews.com/us/homeland-security/cbp-border-security-report-week-ending-july-25-2015-including-drug-trafficking/>

¹⁰ A version of this first appeared online Wednesday, January 14, 2009, as “Xicanosmosis: The Semiotic Visions of Izel Vargas!” <http://textunex.blogspot.com/2009/01/xicanosmosis-semiotic-visions-of-izel.html>.