

## The Joke is on You, “Illegal Alien” Supremacists: Enrique Chagoya’s Satirical Discourse on Settler-Colonialism and Social Injustice

by Gordon Fung



### Lecture by Enrique Chagoya

Thursday, April 8, 2021

Drawing from his experiences living on both sides of the U.S.-Mexico border in the late '70s and in Europe in the late '90s, Enrique Chagoya juxtaposes secular, popular, and religious symbols in order to address the ongoing cultural clash between the United States, Latin America, and the world. Chagoya has been exhibiting his work nationally and internationally for over two decades. He is Full Professor at Stanford University’s department of Art and Art History.

Presented by the CCA Printmedia program as part of the 26th annual Hamaguchi Scholarship Awards. Part of event series Focus Fine Arts.

Professor Enrique Chagoya (b. 1953) is a Mexican-American painter and printmaker based in San Francisco, and a Professor at Stanford University’s Department of Art and Art History. He is also a recipient of the prestigious Guggenheim Fellowship in Fine Arts as of 2021. His early prints evince major influences from Spanish Romantic artist Francisco Goya’s engravings, as Goya’s works were readily available in his hometown, Mexico City. As a kid, his father’s divalent careers in banking and art nurtured young Chagoya’s passion in arts. Alongside frequent museum visits with his father, and by his dad’s involvement in catching forgeries, Chagoya was inspired to craft “counterfeit” parody works that closely resembled the original. Pursuing an undergraduate degree at the San Francisco Art Institute in the '80s, Chagoya started to hack the power of parodies, satires, and jokes through his artistic practice.

Chagoya’s etching and aquatint work *Against the Common Good II* (1983) imitates Goya’s etching *Contra el bien general* (1810, first realized) from the series of 82 prints created during 1810–20 titled *Los desastres de la guerra* (*The Disasters of the War*). Both images show a diabolic bat-winged man drafting his evil plan, though in Chagoya’s version the man is Ronald Reagan. In the 1980s, the Reagan Administration backed and funded the right-wing rebel group Nicaraguan Contras.<sup>1</sup> The name of the terrorist group echoed the title of Goya’s work, as “contra” means against. The extremist group violated human rights and sparked terrorism that severely hurt Nicaraguan civilians. The juxtaposition of serious subject matter and light-hearted humor is Chagoya’s signature: poking fun and raising awareness of social injustice. Chagoya grew up witnessing many catastrophes and horrible political situations in Mexico. His arrival in the United States in the '70s exposed him to even more social traumas and political hypocrisy. To withstand the distress from social unrest, Chagoya found humor to be the best protection against turbulent times. This effective coping tactic is inseparable from both



*Against the Common Good II* (1983) by Enrique Chagoya, shown during the presentation.

<sup>1</sup> Also known as *contrarrevolucionarios* and *Resistencia Nicaragüense* in Spanish.



*Uprising of the Spirit* (1994) by Enrique Chagoya, shown during the presentation.

his life and endeavors.<sup>2</sup> Through provocative, satirical art, Chagoya creates dialogue with viewers to reflect on all sorts of social injustice.

Bringing together American cartooning and Aztec mural styles, Chagoya's painting on *amate* paper *Uprising of the Spirit* (1994) shows a confrontation between Superman and Nezahualcōyotl—the 15th century king of Texcoco in the Aztec Empire. Chagoya uses American cartoon characters in abundance, showing how the U.S. dominates world culture, made possible by globalization and imperialism. Nezahualcōyotl favored the discontinuation of human sacrifice in Aztec rituals, though Western media such as magazines, movies, and documentaries, have barely mentioned it. The Texcoco king contributed

great achievements to Nahuatl literature, architecture, and invention. According to Aztec legends, Nezahualcōyotl was known for inventing a flying mechanism—a scene captured by Diego Rivera in the *Pan American Unity* mural (Panel 1). Nezahualcōyotl's innovation is not unlike 15th century thinker and artist Leonardo da Vinci's attempt crafting a flying machine. The complete ignorance of Nezahualcōyotl's polymathy is a colonist mindset to deny the greatness in Indigenous civilizations. Colonizers have been dehumanizing Indigenous people to justify their brutal genocides, land looting, enslavements, forced breeding, and conversions, among many other inhuman exploitations. Conquistadors destroyed almost all Native Mexican codices that celebrate a diverse knowledge of ritual, history, and science. To create the painting, Chagoya lifted an illustration of Nezahualcōyotl from the *Codex Ixtlilxōchitl* (early 17th century). The codex was attributed to Fernando de Alva Cortés Ixtlilxōchitl (ca. 1568–1648) and was commissioned by the Spanish viceroy of New Spain to recapture the destroyed knowledge of Indigenous Mexicans. Because this reproduction of the codex was made with European papers, Chagoya reworked the illustration on traditional *amate* paper—a Mexican-Indigenous bark paper made specifically for codices—reclaiming the material authority and authenticity on making Mexican codices.

Chagoya's color lithograph *Detention at the Border of Language* (2019) criticizes the hostility of U.S. white supremacists towards "illegal immigrants" from Latin America. His work parodies Charles F. Wimar's painting *The Abduction of Daniel Boone's Daughter by the Indians* (1853). Wimar's work reflects racial stereotypes in which Native Americans are depicted as "primitive savages" through the Eurocentric lens. Chagoya, mending the false representation, reinterpreted

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<sup>2</sup> In 1985, an unprecedented earthquake, with a magnitude of 8.0, shook Mexico City and claimed over 30,000 lives. Chagoya, while pursuing an MFA degree at the University College of Berkeley, was distressed about his family and friends in Mexico as immediate communication was in vain. When phone service resumed, the first thing he recalled was his sister's joke, casting Chagoya's worries away in no time. Plácido Domingo, a Spanish refugee, Mexico-raised, and U.S.-based opera singer, flew from the U.S. to Mexico to provide prompt humanitarian support to the earthquake victims by holding benefit concerts as disaster reliefs. The singer's name means a "pleasant Sunday," and since the earthquake happened on a Thursday, Chagoya's sister joked that the devastated local coined a new name for the earthquake as *pinch\* jueves* ("f-word Thursday"). The parodied name granted a good laugh between the siblings and effectively dissipated the worries during that traumatic time.





*Detention at the Border of Language* (2019) by Enrique Chagoya, shown during the presentation.



*Aliens Sans Frontières (Aliens Without Borders)* (2016) by Enrique Chagoya, shown during the presentation.



Spread from a vintage book, *Razas humanas y banderas del universo (Human Races and Flags of the Universe)*, published around 1955–60.

the painting with a comical style. The lithograph shows the three Indigenous people as the trans-continental Border Patrol agents, one of which wears a comically huge black and red on white mask, arresting Donald Duck, the “illegal alien.” Donald Duck is a symbolic representation of former President Trump. Though Trump’s image has appeared in several of Chagoya’s works, the artist was tired of his presence and decided to turn him into a defenseless, scared, “illegal,” little duck who pleads with the Native Border Patrol agents for mercy. The European colonists were undocumented on arrival to the Americas, having no passports or papers now required by anyone entering the country. Trump’s xenophobic administration amplified the usage of the term “illegal alien” on Latin American immigrants who crossed the border. This description is unjust and wrong, as many Latin Americans have Indigenous ancestry, and therefore an ancestral connection to the land. Not only do such depictions defy Indigenous land rights and land claims, it also hides away the guilt behind white supremacists who refuse to acknowledge that they are here because their ancestors looted the land, among many other inhumane crimes performed since the Europeans’ arrival.

Furthering the topic on diasporas and racial diversity, Chagoya poked fun of racial stereotypes that commonly generate misrepresentations in the 2016 color lithograph on handmade *amate* paper, *Aliens Sans Frontières (Aliens Without Borders)*. The set of six self-portraits are humorously juxtaposed onto six different racial roles and ethnic dresses, from a Manchurian court lady who wears a signature *liangbatou* headwear to an aboriginal mother who carries an infant. The idea was inspired by a vintage book *Razas humanas y banderas del universo (Human Races and Flags of the Universe)*, published around 1955–60, that Chagoya saw in a flea market in Mexico City. It was a series of illustrations that depicts and describes appearances, costumes, and cultures of different races across the world. Negative racial stereotypes and vague descriptions in that book inspired him to play around with these images. Besides parodying the racially insensitive publication, the juxtaposition of his own images of these various races was informed by his DNA ancestry lab-test. Having a majority of Native American and Basque genetic components, he also unveiled ancestries in his blood from all across the world—having genetic components of Jewish, African, Arabic, and Asian heritage. While Chagoya celebrates his ancestors’ love of diversity, he pities the endless racial injustice and discriminations his ancestors faced, saying “if my genes get along with each other, why don’t people get along with each other? And I hope someday, we will.”<sup>3</sup>

<sup>3</sup> Enrique Chagoya, “Focus Fine Arts—Enrique Chagoya” (guest lecture on Zoom, San Francisco, CA, April 8, 2021).



Examples of Enrique Chagoya's work show during the presentation.

Chagoya's well-informed artistic jokes have brought light-hearted humor to viewers in the face of ceaseless injustice. As pioneering psychoanalyst Sigmund Freud theorizes, "humour is a means of obtaining pleasure in spite of the distressing affects that disturb it; it acts as a substitute for this emergence of affect, it takes its place."<sup>4</sup> Chagoya commented that our modern society has had huge achievements in technology, such as space exploration and a swift creation of vaccines against the new novel coronavirus, but have yet to develop sensitivity and empathy towards the people in our world. Hateful crimes like racism, homophobia, and misogyny ought to be eliminated not now, not tomorrow, but yesterday.

Through humor, Chagoya found the encouragement to change the future, in spite of the tremendous hardship of tearing down white supremacy. Chagoya emphasized that art is not a superficial attempt to generate prosperity and fame. Instead, he affirmed that "art is what makes us human, and hopefully through art, we could make people think about making a better world for everybody."<sup>5</sup> Political and social traumas have been oppressing and traumatizing our entire society. Social and racial injustice, unfortunately, are nowhere near their extinctions. Our quest to seek permanent resolutions remain remote and apparently unreachable. That said, we can still make fun of this moment, getting the best out of this collective hardship. The more that insensitive white supremacists spark injustice, the more artists can prank and joke on them. Pranksters-artist-activists of the world, unite!

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<sup>4</sup> Sigmund Freud, *The Joke and its Relation to the Unconscious* (London: Penguin Press, 2003), 220. The book was originally published in 1905.

<sup>5</sup> Chagoya, "Focus Fine Arts."