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# SJSU Professors Explore Identities in 'Migratory Cultures'



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A one-time exhibit at the San Jose Museum of Art will explain the divide many immigrants experience as they juggle past and present identities

July 6, 2016 by Gary Singh



**SPLIT PERSONALITIES:** A one-time exhibit at the San Jose Museum of Art will explain the divide many immigrants experience as they juggle past and present identities.

Over the course of 20 years teaching art at [San Jose State University](#), Robin Lasser recognized a common theme in many of her students' work: that of a third space between their native identity and their American identity.

In order to develop her empathy and understanding for her students, she began to envision a project that empowered people with a platform to tell their stories and contemplate their creative explorations of betweenness.

Along with SJSU Art Department professor Craig Hobbs, the two artists composed a large-scale video work, *Migratory Cultures: Mapping the Distance from Me to You*, an

interdisciplinary transmedia story of sorts. Just after sunset on July 21, a projection will be shown on the outside of the [San Jose Museum of Art](#). The video will feature stories from San Jose and Bay Area immigrants using audio and text, combined with other migratory species and water flows to represent a shared global commons and the universality of human movement and experience. Visitors to the space will also get to share their stories once the main projection comes to a close.

With migrants and immigrants dominating headlines these days, Lasser felt the time was right for such a project.

"In any one of my classes, if I have 22 students, there are probably 13 different primary languages that are spoken," she says. "I figured that was a good place to start. One of the motivations as well—we're in a cultural climate right now with folks like Donald Trump who are putting out a lot of negative energy around those that migrate."

Lasser and Hobbs previously screened *Migratory Cultures* at the Pajaro Valley Arts Gallery in Watsonville and onto the *Sunset Magazine* building in Jack London Square in Oakland. For the Watsonville version, the artists screened the projection onto public handball courts behind the gallery. The resulting video was 20 to 30 feet high, enveloping two handball walls, divided by a perpendicular wall in the middle. The dividing wall created a border between the two courts, symbolizing the split identity of migratory peoples or the forced separation of naturally overlapping and nuanced spaces.

Immigrants and migrant workers characterize a good deal of Watsonville, so the location was perfect. When visitors entered the space and watched the dozen or so storytellers projected onto the walls, the enormity of the project simply took them over, inspiring feelings of awe and respect toward the gargantuan scale of the issue. Lasser says the location was also a prime choice because the handball courts were originally brought to Watsonville by Irish immigrants the early 20th century.

The project is generative in the sense that each time it moves to a new location, more stories are added. Some are even left behind. The stories themselves thus become migratory.

As a result, the version the artists will project at the San Jose Museum of Art is timely and appropriate for several reasons. The museum currently shows Guillermo Galindo and Richard Misrach's exhibit, *Border Cantos*, so the subject matter dovetails in perfect fashion. The opportunity also gave Lasser a chance to include a few of her students' stories in the project, along with those of San Jose residents. With a significant portion of the city's people hailing from another country, there was more than enough material.

"The stories being told are: What is life like for people that have emigrated globally from around the world and landing here, San Jose, Silicon Valley and beyond?" Lasser said. "What did they bring along with them, and what might they have lost along the way? What does it feel like to be an immigrant in this country at this particular time?"

As with the previous screenings, locals who show up to watch the projection will be able to jump on the microphone and tell their own stories at the end. Future locations include the Civic Center BART station in San Francisco, as well as Bangalore, India, where a new Metro system and its stations are ripe for artistic exploitation.

### **Migratory Cultures: Mapping the Distance from Me to You**

July 21

Sunset

**San Jose Museum of Art**

<https://migratorycultures.com/>



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