

This topic deserves better treatment

By Lauren Viera, Tribune reporter

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If you're familiar with Ciudad Juarez, the densely populated border town of Chihuahua, Mexico, that's overcrowded with shantytowns and factories, you're probably aware of its infamous reputation for its femicides: hundreds of women violently murdered and left in the desert since the mid-'90s. While it's never easy to stomach art inspired by violence, the [National Museum of Mexican Art](#) has nevertheless showcased a long-running exhibit devoted to those crimes titled "Rastros y Cronicas: Women of Juarez."

The exhibit encapsulates mixed-media work by a few dozen female artists — a trite idea, considering the subject matter — and some of it is quite good. The problem lies in the execution. Without a whole lot of information on the artists or the artwork (other than the occasional, brief artist's statement), the work loses its aesthetic value — and, in tandem, the collective message of the exhibit is less powerful than its potential.

Instead, the exhibit is loaded with information concerning the politics behind the femicides. One placard describes impunity as a growing problem in Juarez culture; another explains how NAFTA's establishment in 1994 led to the rise of Juarez-based maquiladoras (low-wage factories) luring young female workers from the countryside who, in turn, were vulnerable in their new urban surroundings. It's engrossing context, but we're left with very little knowledge of how or why the selected artists were involved to participate in "Rastros y Cronicas." Are they related to victims? Is all of their art devoted to the lost women of Juarez, or have isolated works been created on commission? Furthermore, have these artists even been to Juarez?

This lack of information is particularly frustrating in the exhibit's secondary Kraft Gallery, which showcases a large installation piece by Susan Plum, a Houston-born artist known primarily for her glass sculptures. Here, though, she's strung a series of photographs — hundreds of them — around a metal sculpture and called it "Maya World Tree." At first glance, it's quite powerful: The installation takes over the museum's entire gallery so that when you enter (and shut the door behind you, which adds to the intimacy), it's almost suffocating. There are 450 snapshots, which isn't quite the number of femicides that have been documented since 1993, and they're strung simply on the walls of the gallery, in dispersed with scraps of fabric inscribed with images of candles. The snapshots themselves are candid, casual, unprofessional; their subjects are mostly women, but also some men and children, shown holding a red prayer candle, presumably in tribute to a missing or dead loved one.

Trouble is, we don't know: Are the subjects in Plum's photographs kin to those dead? Are they models meant as stand-ins? Are they simply random residents of Juarez (or elsewhere), shot with a candle prop to play the part? It's unclear, which is frustrating (or maybe that's Plum's point). While art is often more interpretive than factual, the subject matter here is very real. The Juarez femicides have happened to real people, and it would be helpful to know if the 450 snapshots displayed so carefully in this gallery represent real people too.

Back in the exhibit's main gallery, a variety of works cover the pale pink walls. The most visually arresting is Rocio Caballero's "Broken Dreams," a large-scale painting depicting a bride in a white wedding gown trapped between two pink crosses (which have come to symbolize femicides), a string of paper dolls hanging loose in her grasp. Around the corner is Judithe Hernandez's "The Border," an incredibly dark painting of a woman whose throat is cut by a strand of barbed-wire fence; and Azul Luna's "Lost in the Desert: For the Women of Juarez," a smaller photographic work, creepily digitized to show a lone girl standing in the desert, her face eerily melting away to reveal its skeletal structure. These works are successful not because they share a common theme, but because they are well-executed. They could stand alone in their own right.

My growing fascination with the Juarez femicides was recently fueled by a film shown at the Chicago Underground Film Festival in October. "El traspatio" ("Backyard"), set in 1994 when the femicides first underwent investigation, illustrates how the growing phenomenon was swept under the rug by the state of Chihuahua's government in attempts to preserve Juarez's reputation. It's a gripping (and gory) thriller of a film, all the more so because it's true. It's just unfortunate that "Rastros y Cronicas," considering the potential of its depth, doesn't quite deliver that same urgency.

"Rastros y Cronicas: Women of Juarez" at the National Museum of Mexican Art, 1852 W. 19th St., 312-738-1503; nationalmuseumofmexicanart.org. Through July 14, 2010

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