



## Painting as Performance: The Work of Cornelio Campos

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### APA Citation:

Garrigan, S. (2018). Painting as Performance: The Work of Cornelio Campos. *Journal of Narrative and Language Studies*, 6(10), 37-47.

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### Abstract

The paintings of Cornelio Campos, a Mexican-American artist and resident of Durham, North Carolina (USA), whose art expresses the geopolitical and human implications of migration, immigration, and U.S. immigration policy, exercises a particular kind of persuasive force when read through the lenses of authenticity and performance. The combination of thematic and stylistic elements that he uses connect his political and his folkloric art. At the same time, I argue, Campos' aesthetic choices activate the network of positions that connect artist, artwork, and viewer in such a way that shifts the object of contemplation from the painting and onto the process of dialogue among artist, artwork, and spectator that that occurs during the act of contemplation.

**Key Words:** Cornelio Campos, paintings, performance, authenticity, mobility, viewer

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The collective works of self-taught Mexican artist Cornelio Campos, a construction worker and resident of Durham, North Carolina, USA, whose locally renowned immigration-themed paintings bridge the divisions between private and public, defy precise classification. Although thematically his paintings intersect with some of their work, he is not a Chicano artist, an identity category reserved for U.S.-born Americans of Mexican descent who are influenced by the legacy of the Chicano countercultural movement of the 1960s and '70s. Thematically, Campos describes his work in terms of two distinct and yet interconnected genres—folkloric and political art—which in turn impacts the exhibit venues and audiences that they reach. He is perhaps best known for his political art, “because most of my paintings address the struggles that immigrants [are going through] in this moment” (Bennet, 2013). Titles of the many group and solo shows that comprise the list of exhibitions on Campos's résumé reveal a variety of classifications through which his work has been publicly introduced: Mexican, Hispanic, Latinx, folk, and human, as well as the irreducibly personal.

Perhaps more than wedded to a particular identity category, Campos and his paintings are best described as occupants of multiple simultaneous positions: he is a self-described

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Mexican-American artist whose works repeatedly visit the seams that run between and within spaces that media and political discourse tend to treat as enclosed, bounded, and distinct. He has exhibited in art galleries, community centers, universities and museums throughout North Carolina, as well as at the Smithsonian National Museum of the American Indian (2006), at Venice International University with Duke Filmmaker Charles D. Thomson (2017) and, most recently, at the Continental Intercultural Meeting (*Encuentro Continental Intercultural*) in Bogotá, Colombia (2018). The media attention and scholarship that Campos's artwork has generated place particular emphasis on his personal story as a mode of conceptualizing his art, suggesting that the biographical aspect, far from comprising a supplemental tag, forms an essential component of his work from the perspectives of both the production and reception of his paintings.

As will be seen in what follows, Campos represents the Mexico/U.S. border from the perspectives of multiple positions in such a way that reveals the continuities and ruptures that reach beyond the walls and barbed wire fences built to contain and bind each space. As a result, there is a porous, mobile, and conversational quality to his compositions and to the types of gaze that they elicit. Campos doubles positions in several coinciding ways: on one level, as just mentioned, published commentary on his art has the tendency to bring attention to his person, and Campos's own story provides a strong narrative component to the art that he produces:

“Coming from the town of Cherán in the state of Michoacán, Mexico, Campos has lived in California, Georgia, Missouri, and North Carolina. He came to the U.S. for the first time in 1989 to visit family members in California and started to work in the agricultural sector. In 1990, encouraged by a family member who worked regularly in North Carolina, he came to pick tobacco leaves in Henderson during the warm months of the year. Not having traditionally worked in agriculture, he found the experience less than ideal: housing infrastructure consisted of mobile homes that were not adequate for human living and the work performed was hard and at times hazardous. According to Campos, this was the beginning of his recognition of ‘seeing difference’ and the ‘contradictions of the experience of migration’ for the undocumented migrant; the American Dream and the realities of working in the U.S. were two very distinct things, a theme that recurs in much of his work” (Valdivia, Palis, & Reilly, 2011, p. 290).

At the same time, as witnessed in the following quote from an interview with Campos published online, the increased priority given to his biography and status as an immigrant who has traveled the path from undocumented status to U.S. citizenship creates an intersection between the personal and the collective in his depictions of the immigration experience. In this way, the artist's individual migration story becomes a portal for those of many, and so there opens a unique time-space in the contemplation of his pieces that is both personal and social:

“Once I paint this kind of paintings . . . especially the immigration paintings, I'm trying to express the feelings that I had at that moment when I was crossing myself the border, which also a lot of people who don't paint can feel connected [with] what I paint, and some people might make a comment saying ‘Oh, it's exactly how I feel, and I'm seeing [it] here in painting’ (Bennett, 2013).

In addition to these examples of Campos's multiplicity of positions, his experiences as both a construction worker and a well-known and connected local artist who engages in frequent collaborations with programs and academes from local universities link him to distinct worlds that otherwise would have little or nothing to do with one another: “I have the opportunity to be able to bridge from one to another, and I go back and forth” (Bennett, 2013). In this way, Campos is positioned as both subject and object in his paintings: as a naturalized immigrant and former agricultural worker, he has lived within the realms of the experiences that he depicts

in his art; as an artist, he generates the pictorial vocabulary through which the border experience is expressed.

The powerful sense of authenticity that is generated by Campos's work hinges upon the performative quality of his work, which impacts the perceived relationships among the artist, his artwork, and the world (Pippin, 2005, p. 582). I refer to performance here not as a theatrical (fictional) reproduction, but rather as a mode of perception that activates the relationships that connect creator, object, and audience during the act of contemplation. In this way, the target of observation in the context of Campos's work is not the painting alone, but also the self in relation to it, the artwork in relation to the world and the spectator revealed as a social agent who, like the events and situations depicted, is continuously informed and shaped by local, national, and global dynamics.

Based on the above description, the type of authenticity with which Campos's work intersects bridges the categories of what Dutton and Wang have respectively described as "expressive" and "existential" (Pippin, 2005, pp. 611–612). While the former refers to the "manner in which something [is] created" and describes the "true expression of an individual's or society's values and beliefs," the latter is concerned with the reception of the work of art, such as that which can be accessed through the tourist experience: "For instance, people seeking existential authenticity may be attuned to the way in which a Native American dance makes *them* feel connected to the self and others" (Pippin, 2005, p. 612). Both of these categories are subjective and relative in nature, and deal with the individual's abilities to use exposure to things and events as a way of accessing a sense of agency while navigating societal pressures and power dynamics. At the same time, both expressive and existential authenticity also imply that the subjective experience can be harnessed as a means of transcending the boundaries of self and connecting with that which lies outside its boundaries on a profound level. What Campos's paintings reveal, then, when read through the lenses of authenticity and performance, are the artist's and the spectators' capacities to occupy the positions of self and other simultaneously—to rescript themselves in accordance with alternative positions, perspectives, and landscapes in such a way that reinforces the social, relational, and mobile nature of the human experience in both the individual and collective realms of experience.

### **Painting as Performance**

In his introductory book to Performance Studies (2013), Richard Schechner addresses the question, "Where do performances take place"? His response extends the definition of performance to include still objects like books and paintings: "A performance takes place as action, interaction, and relation. In this regard, a painting . . . can be performative or can be analyzed 'as' performance. Performance isn't 'in' anything, but 'in between.'" So, to view a static object as a performance is to enact the "complex relationships" that thread together the original contexts of production and references to places and times in the painting's content, the memories of the painter, the venue, and the subjective experiences of the viewer—"both past and present" (Schechner, 2013, p. 30). In other words, to view a painting as a performance is to participate in the representation—to accept a role, to go beyond looking, to be implicated, to witness rather than to look or watch (Taylor, 2004, p. 32).

So, with this in mind, there are three characteristics or aesthetic strategies that run through and connect the political and folkloric themes that Campos identifies in his work. And while I will identify them separately here, I view them as intersecting aesthetic choices that overlap and blend together in a type of kaleidoscopic effect that impacts and complicates the

viewer's experience. From there, one can begin to assess the “complex relationships” that Schechner identifies among the artist, the painting, and the viewing public, as well as to explore the questions that Valdivia, Palis, and Reilly raise regarding how Campos's work effectively reconfigures the spaces, positions, and chronologies of the local.

The first of the aesthetic traits to be discussed is that of *repetition*, by which I mean not a copy or lack of originality, but rather an intentional and strategic re-production of theme, color, and design that, while initially familiar to those versed in Mexican art, takes on new meanings with closer scrutiny. In doing so, I argue, these artworks recast what is “known” into new, more challenging, and more complex arenas. This use of repetition, of compositional elements that the draw from Mexican regional *artesanías* and popular culture is evident upon first glance of Campos's paintings. Isolating and naming them, viewers may recognize several of the features that Campos uses in his political paintings. Pre-Columbian motifs, national icons of Mexico (the Coatlicue, the Chac Mool, the double-headed serpent of pre-Columbian mythology), national icons of the U.S. (such as the American flag, the Statue of Liberty), whether portrayed in complete or fragmented from, are a few examples. In his folkloric art, the *diseños* (designs) that Campos depicts—such as *Diseño Uruapán* (2011) and *Pájaro azul* (2008), also suggest repetition or continuity in the showcasing of regionally-specific art; each of these paintings point the viewer toward a design derived from Mexican *artesanos*:



[Figure 1: *Pájaro azul* (Blue Bird), 2008, by C. Campos]

As Campos stated in a personal interview conducted for the purposes of this essay (2018), he was first exposed to art as a child, when he had some access to art classes offered by Pánfilo Macías, a student enrolled in the *Escuela Popular de Bellas Artes* (Popular School of Fine Arts)

in Morelia. Macías, Campos explained, most likely taught art to various communities in compliance with the social services requirement for his education. He described watching Macías work in his own home studio, eventually becoming his assistant, and gradually building up his art supplies in order to practice on his own whenever possible. Independently, Campos studied numerous illustrations in art encyclopedias, carefully deciphering the various painterly techniques that he encountered, and later frequented various cultural centers (*casas de cultura*) in Guadalajara as an observer during his free time, where he was able to see various artworks in process. He visited sites such as the *Hospicio Cabañas*, a former colonial-era hospital and current world heritage site where he could study some of Mexico's famous murals, including José Clemente Orozco's *El hombre de fuego* (Man of Fire, 1938-39). While Campos eventually did enroll in a drawing class in Guadalajara with the help of some friends of his parents, he is a self-taught artist whose paintings underwent a drastic shift in theme following his transition to the United States, after which he channeled the various difficulties of changing cultures and occupying a series of marginalized positions within the network of U.S. social, political, and economic power relations into his art (Campos, 2018). The very process of learning that Campos describes, then, plays into the idea of repetition not as an end but as a point of departure, as a means of discovering the simultaneously familiar and yet irreducibly novel perspective that he sheds on geographical places, concepts, and cultural icons.

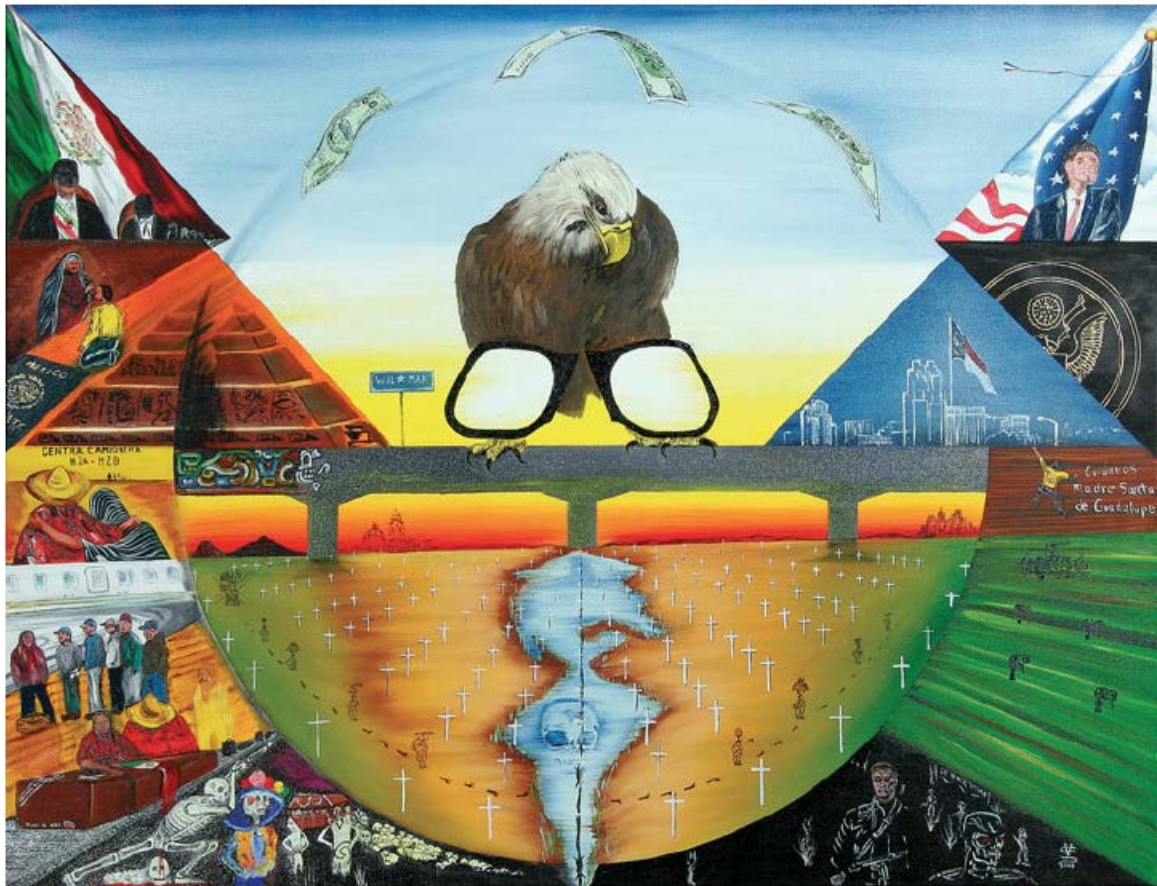
The use of symbols, such as the Virgin of Guadalupe, the Day of the Dead themes and figures, the vibrant use of color, style and theme that hearken back to the Muralist movement [such as in *Mujer con trenza* (Woman with a Braid, 2006) or *Viejita vendiendo flores* (Elderly Lady Selling Flowers, 2006)], are elements that may at first comfort the viewer in the way that recognition inevitably does.



[Figure 2. *Mujer con trenza* (Woman with Braid), 2006, by C. Campos.]

Upon giving a closer look, however, this initial familiarity gives way to the realization that this is not simple replication, but repetition with a difference—one that suggests itself on

multiple levels and which imbues the familiar with an unsettling tone. This difference shines through, for example, in the artist's original combinations of themes on a single canvas, or the ways in which he plays with paradigmatic and syntagmatic relationships in time and space. Viewing *Libre comercio* (*Free Trade*) horizontally, rather than vertically, for example, reveals that a blockbuster Hollywood icon shares the lower plane of the canvas with Day-of-the-Dead skeletons. In the same painting, there is the Pre-Colombian pyramid sharing the central plane of the canvas with the U.S. city-scape, and images of Pre-Colombian migration paralleling the journey of the running silhouettes of modern-day migrant workers:



[Figure 3, *Libre Comercio* (Free Trade), 2004, by C. Campos.]

Similarly, in *Antorcha Guadalupana*, the overwhelming theme is the question of positioning itself, and specifically how center and periphery, the upper and lower planes of vertical hierarchy, and the patrimonial icon of the Statue of Liberty cast a lens that converts immigrants into aliens, airplanes into UFOs, and the polished and precise geometry of modern U.S. cities into tombstones that cover the culturally and historically rich but abandoned artifacts of Mexican cultural patrimony below. In these cases, the collage-like blending of transnational icons, and the merging of disparate/distant chronological and geographical contexts and of different domains of power, nudge the viewer into apprehending the familiar in a most unfamiliar way.

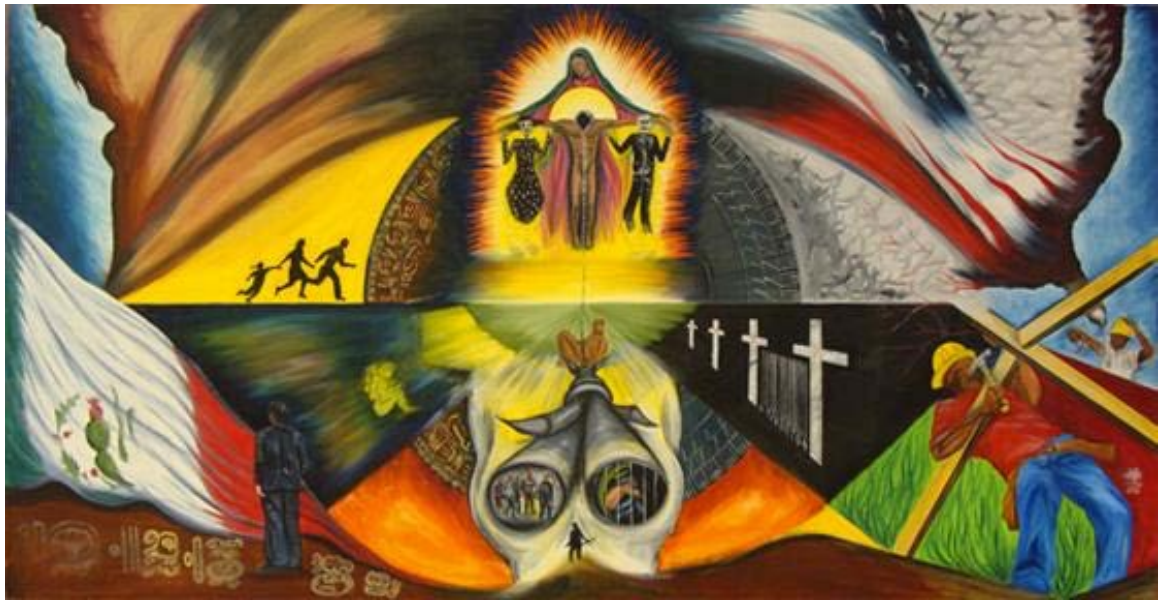


[Figure 4. *Antorcha Guadalupana*, 2007, by C. Campos.]

As a result of this technique of unique and collage-like combinations of elements that are both familiar as symbols and unknown in the novel positions in which they are portrayed, the viewer of Campos's paintings is invited to occupy multiple subject positions at once, moving and shifting from one to the other during the act of contemplation. And while there is a sense of right and wrong or justice and injustice that the viewer can derive from his paintings and textual explanations, their impact reaches far beyond the comfort (or discomfort) of those stances: where would I "stand" in this painting? Where would I not stand? The divisions between the collective and the personal, the "third" world and the "first," the migratory and the static, and the diachronic from the synchronic, dissolve. To look at his paintings is to sift restlessly between and among positions, despite the potential aversions and preferences for one or another.

Certainly, there is a preferred perspective or conclusion to be drawn—that of awareness—which may constitute a didactic point to Campos's paintings that can also be gleaned from his own commentaries. But it is also what his paintings propose beyond this which merits further consideration—there is an aesthetic response to geopolitical issues in which, like it or not, any viewer, anywhere, is implied. As viewers, as participants, we are invited to recognize, mis-recognize, place, and dis-place the known spaces, icons, and meanings that we unconsciously and uncritically assign to set contexts. The American flag in Campos's paintings is not so much directly apprehended, but rather filtered through a myriad of contradictory and overlapping themes. One gets the sense of looking through many sets of eyes—that the act of contemplation is shared between painter and viewer, and among viewers of different regions, nations, places and socioeconomic backgrounds. This disruption of the expected through original blends of familiar motifs has the potential of deep disclosure, of revealing the viewers to themselves. And, as shown in some of the ambivalent student reactions to hardships depicted in some of Campos's artwork, which Valdivia et al. document in their 2011 article (pp. 297–300), that is a journey that one may or may not be ready to take.

The second theme that disrupts the option of passive contemplation in Campos's work is that of *mobility*. This motif shows up both explicitly, such as in *Frontera* (2006), *Esperanza* (2008), *Lucha* (2010–2011), and the aforementioned *Antorcha guadalupana* (2007), and implicitly, such as in *Caras y máscaras de Cherán* (2007) and *Pájaro azul* (2008).



[Figure 5: *Frontera* (Border), 2006, by C. Campos.]

In Campos's explicit renditions of mobility, at the theme or content level the viewer witnesses various episodes of border-crossing that depict the geopolitical space not as a physical location, but as an inevitably social and personal experience—a rite of passage that demands different levels of sacrifice from its participants. For the person who migrates, the voyage may claim life. The viewer of the painting may be nudged into a negotiation between recognition and disorientation. The experience of mobility disrupts the comfort zone, those unquestioned habits of seeing and identifying oneself in place and space.

In a more implicit way, Campos's folkloric paintings also imply movement. In his book *Sueños Americanos* (2011), next to a replication of *Caras y máscaras de Cherán*, for example, the artist writes, “*Estas danzas se pueden admirar durante las fiestas religiosas y culturales del 12 de septiembre y de fin de año*” (“These dances can be admired during the religious and cultural festivals of the 12 of September and at the end of the year.”). In other words, there is an invitation to look closer, to take the voyage, to explore the painting's content until it leads the viewer back to the artist's original source of inspiration. In the textual accompaniment to *Pájaro azul* (2011), in which the vibrant and dynamic brush strokes, curved lines, and collapse of foreground and background draw the eye to multiple focal points at once, Campos invites his viewers to travel to Michoacán in an explanation of the paintings that also functions as a deictic device—a finger pointing toward the distance in a direction that becomes part of the viewing experience, whether or not the voyage is a real possibility: “*Ustedes pueden ser testigos si algún día visitan Michoacán y sus muchos pueblos artesanales. Michoacán es un estado ubicado en la región suroeste de México*” (You all can be witnesses if one day you visit Michoacán and its many craft villages”).

Sometimes, the voyage presented is an impossible one, a nostalgic reconstruction of an era and place now disfigured by the forces of modernization, such as in *Cherán* (1998), which appears at first glance to be a snapshot of the artist's place of origin, but turns out to be a nostalgic reconstruction of a sense of place that is no longer to be found. Sometimes, in Campos's work, the voyage is mystical, such as *De Sur a Norte* (2009), in which the artist



depicts the sacred icons that are shared between the cultures of the North and South, “from Perú to Alaska” (Campos, 2011).

Lastly, a sense of voyage or mobility implied in Campos’s work is stylistic and subtle, showing up in a repeated use of dynamic lines, which may appear in thick, bold, black or dark blue color, such as those that mark the ground and punctuate the journey of the silhouetted voyager in *Esperanza*, the folds in the clothes and wraps that bind an ambulant mother and her child in *Madre y niño* (Mother and Child, 2006), or the storm represented in the folds of the skeleton’s dress in *Catrina—New Orleans* (2005). In other cases, this dynamism of lines shows up in finer detail—the pottery designs in *Cántaros* (2004), or the vine surrounding the bird in *Diseño Uruapán* (2011).

In both explicit and implicit manifestations, then, the mobility in Campos’s work operates as a type of lens that moves across the strategic iconic repetitions in a kaleidoscopic gesture that alludes to a third subtle, yet important, characteristic of his work: the idea of incompleteness. While the paintings themselves are compositionally complete, the dynamics that they set into motion are not. The journeys in Campos’s art have begun, but not finished. Viewers are invited to go on, to continue, to witness first-hand, to press on to deeper understanding and levels of exposition, to experience the border as participating witnesses, rather than outside bystanders. The double-headed serpent has not completed its voyage, nor does it respect the spatial and temporal borders that divide the spaces that it traverses. The “home” space of the migrant becomes the journey, as is that of the viewer willing to accept the invitation that Campos’s paintings offer. And, if taken seriously, the journey it is not an easy one. What might seem at first glance to be a beautiful folkloric painting is not, when read in this way, a quaint depiction of a regional character and his or her craft, but a lived reality that blinks back at the viewer.

If mobility can be described not only as a way of relating to the border; of positioning multiple different objects, subjects and selves in relation to it; and also as a type of moral and aesthetic ideal in Campos’s painting, then it follows that the emphatic visual references to the limitations of movement also merit consideration. The clear division between those who can and cannot move with autonomy and agency manifest in Campos’s work in several ways: the white crosses separated by a bar code in *Frontera* (Figure 5), representing the juxtaposition of human deaths and “free” goods as they converge at the border, the running figures in *Frontera* and *Antorcha Guadalupana*, which suggest the urgency of fleet rather than the agency of direction, and the barbed wire fences of *Esperanza* (2008) and *Frontera en la educación* (the Border in Education), 2014.



Fig. 6: *Frontera en la educación* (The Border in Education), 2014, by C. Campos.

*Frontera en la educación* is a commentary on the plight facing children of undocumented workers known as “Dreamers” or DACA (Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals) recipients, who have been denied the originally promised path to citizenship and are thus prohibited from attending universities in several states and most recently presented with the prospect of deportation. In this technically straightforward yet profound painting, the American flag and the border converge in violent confrontation with the Dreamer. Her graduation cap and gown echo the blue color of the agricultural workers on the other side of the border fence at the same time as the drastic difference in scale places them in visual tension with one another. The barbed wire casts shadows onto the Dreamer’s upturned face; her closed eyes, along with the sinking sunset in the background, suggest finality at the same time as work needing to be done, represented by the perspective lines of never-ending unharvested crops stretching to a distant converging point in the background. This painting is a confrontation of sorts; it is simultaneously an acknowledgement of the extreme marginalization that describes the impact of U.S. political and economic policies on the one hand, and the blindness of privilege on the other. This painting could be regarded as a mirror or a representation of their own plights for some viewers; for others, as a call to action, and yet another spectator may confront the discomfort of moral dilemmas presented by the realization of their own unearned advantages.

To briefly conclude, then, these three characteristics or aesthetic choices that each play a role in Campos’s paintings—repetition with difference, mobility, and incompleteness—not only situate Campos’s work well within the realms of authenticity and performance, but also within the scope of what Chela Sandoval describes as “differential consciousness,” the induction of social justice through a series of representations that “challenge the legitimacy of dominant ideology as natural” (2000, p. 87). Campos’ work embodies in visual form the task as well as the persuasive force of narrative and focalization—to reflect not so much “reality” but what and how we see, both as individual spectators and social beings whose perceptions are

continuously re-shaped in constant dialogue with those of others. In this way, authenticity is framed not as a type of a-priori, inherent quality attributable to the painting, but rather as an effect that is generated by the invitation to gaze inter-subjectively, from both within and outside the boundaries of the self. More than simply challenging binary understandings of position and power, however, the “kaleidoscopic” effect generated by Campos’s compositional techniques knocks perception off its habitual track, and, in doing so, perforates traditional founding icons and stories in such a way that creates unexpected entryways for the viewer. What is authentic about these paintings is the confrontation of positions that they invite the viewer to apprehend; to look at Campos’s paintings through this lens is to step into the space of a social encounter that transforms the outside viewer into a participating witness.

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