



Introduction

By Liz Wylie

Working with Deborah Koenker on this project has been an eye-opening journey. I first met Koenker about twenty years ago, but we did not discuss an exhibition until I began work at the Kelowna Art Gallery nine years ago. The idea of trying to meet and talk with the temporary agricultural workers placed here in the Okanagan came to her about four years ago, and we both went into full research mode, ably and kindly assisted by her husband, Roberto Pacheco, who originally hails from Mexico. Koenker has been tireless in her travels up and down the Okanagan Valley talking with both the Mexican workers and those individuals who have support roles for them. I had not realized before that there were over 2000 of these men and women in the Okanagan every year, so I did not know either the terms under which they come here. This information will be set out in the texts that follow in this publication.

Koenker's approach to her photographs allows these 160 people to speak directly to us – the viewers of her show and readers of this publication. Each sitter states in such open, direct, and honest terms their thoughts about being here, as they have written them with markers on a tortilla, and held it up to her camera to be photographed along with his or her own face. Koenker has translated these texts into English, and they appear alongside the reproductions of each sitter's image in this book.

In addition to her work making up the multi-faceted installation that the exhibition has become in her hands, we have produced this publication, and I am very pleased to have included such important texts by well-known and gifted writers. John Vaillant is an award-winning Vancouver-based writer, whose first novel *The Jaguar's Children* (2015) gives readers a chilling portrait of life in contemporary (post NAFTA) Oaxaca in Mexico. His text here provides his point of view and skill as a writer who can evoke, time, place and mood. Juan Felipe Herrera is currently the poet laureate of the US. We are honoured to have a short text from him about his decision to compose his poem *187 REASONS MEXICANOS CAN'T CROSS THE BORDER*, and are most grateful to him for permission to print the entire poem here. Vancouver-based Randy Lee Cutler explores the topic of the true cost of the food we buy and eat. The curatorial text on Deborah Koenker's art by myself is meant to provide a context for this project, both in art historical terms, and within the trajectory of her artistic career.

Certain experiences in our lives are so intense as to crack open our minds to new information and ideas. We call these life-changing, and I must say that the work on this project and all I have learned along the way, has been that for me. I am deeply grateful.

Crossing Over: The Art of Deborah Koenker

By Liz Wylie

Art should have political, spiritual, and surprising elements. It should try to find new language of communicating in order to give awareness to the public. Then every society can use the layer it needs at the moment. If one is interested in the political, they can take that. If the next one needs spiritual, it can be found in the same work. So if you just did one level, for example only political, it's like an old newspaper, you read it today and tomorrow it's old news. The art dies. Art with this kind of complexity has many lives where many societies can take something different at different times. It can live for centuries, otherwise who cares?

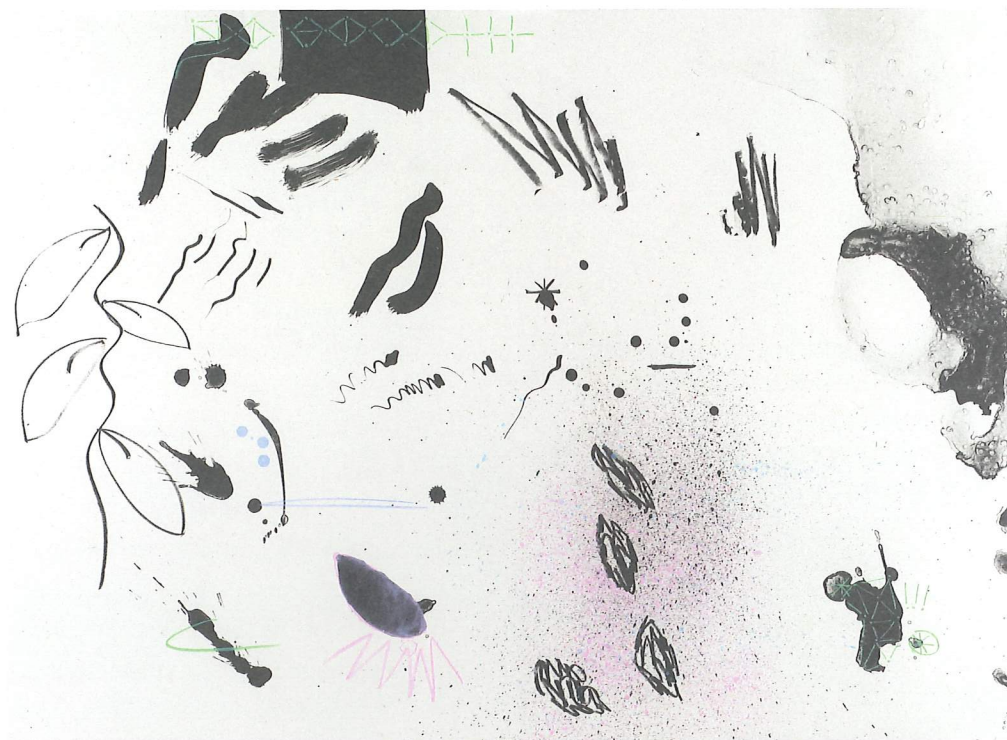
– Marina Abramovic

The sort of complexity or multi-valence that artist Marina Abramovic speaks of as necessary for an engaged art to have lasting power is in fact one of the hallmarks of success in the work of Vancouver-based artist Deborah Koenker. Koenker does not produce art that is simply placards for causes – her projects always function deeply as art – with strong visual impact, deep emotional and psychological aspects, and satisfyingly complicated layers of meaning. There is a process of transformation that occurs in Koenker's hands, as she takes the issues she is concerned about and sets out to give them visual expression in her work. US Poet Laureate Juan Felipe Herrera (who has a text in this publication) has said that when you turn something into art, you honour it. This hard-won achievement has been the kernel at the heart of Koenker's practice since she began working as an artist.

Building on her previous bodies of work, Koenker became interested several years ago in producing a project about the Mexican agricultural workers in the Okanagan. These men and women come here under Canada's Seasonal Agricultural Workers Program (SAWP), and provide low-cost work in greenhouses, farms, vineyards, and orchards for up to eight months (per person) of any given year. Koenker arranged to make visits to this region over a three-year period, travelling up and down the Okanagan Valley, meeting with workers, their support workers, and with owners of vineyards and orchards. She was struck by how much the workers missed their families and their own cuisine and culture, and she was impressed by the enormous personal sacrifices the workers make to come here in order to earn money to support their loved ones.

She began work on the *Grapes and Tortillas* exhibition without a preconceived idea about the completed installation. It grew from her interest in the situation of the Mexican workers here and took shape organically over time. She herself had gained a large Mexican family by marriage in 1976, and has visited that country many times. Several of her previous bodies of work have been initiated in response to conditions there, beginning with her lyrical and fanciful *The Mexican Night* suite of thirteen prints from 1981-3.





Deborah Koenker, *Tango: The Mexican Night*, 1981, colour lithograph on BFK Rives, 22 ½ x 30 in. (57 x 76 cm).



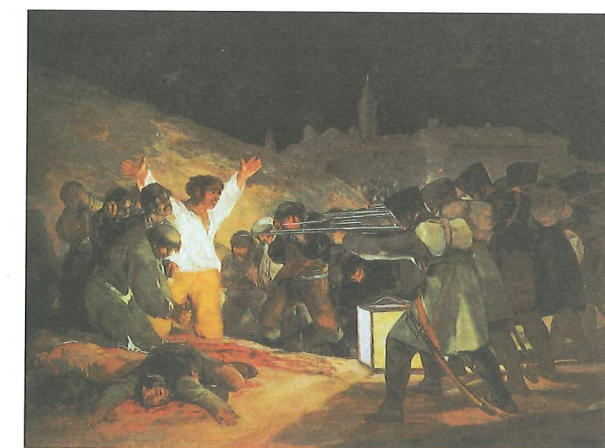
Deborah Koenker, *San Miguel: The Mexican Night*, 1982, colour lithograph on BFK Rives, 22 ½ x 30 in. (57 x 76 cm).

The title for this project was taken from that of a 1970 book of travel ruminations and poems by American Beat poet Lawrence Ferlinghetti about his time in Mexico in the 1960s. The relaxed and heady atmosphere Ferlinghetti and Koenker both evoked is from a time now past, tragically, as Mexico is no longer the peaceful paradise it once was, both for its citizens and visitors. Much of this change is due to the North American Free Trade Agreement that came into effect in 1994, the details and consequences of which will be discussed in detail in other texts in this publication. The negative changes have been profound.

During her visits to the Okanagan Koenker began to take photographs of the Mexican workers she met here, thinking at first she would pair images of single faces with photograph of fruits. The idea was to acknowledge the role the workers had in supplying these fruits to our markets. Later she had the inspired idea of having each participant hold up a flour tortilla (a staple of the Mexican diet) as a blank slate on which s/he wrote his or her name with black marker, adding where they were from, and a thought or comment about working in Canada, or what they missed from home. The intense impact of each of these people both naming themselves and giving voice to their personal experiences strengthens the overall effect of the photographs, and the large number of Koenker's portraits (there are 160 in the exhibition) adds a further freight to the feeling a viewer has from looking at them *en masse*. The power of language is something Koenker has explored in her work quite often. In her case, this has nothing to do with words in and of themselves – the derivations of words, for example – but for the ideas words can convey, and the emotions they can invoke. Thus, she successfully complicates her “straight” photographic portraits by adding the

personal contribution of each sitter, to powerful effect.

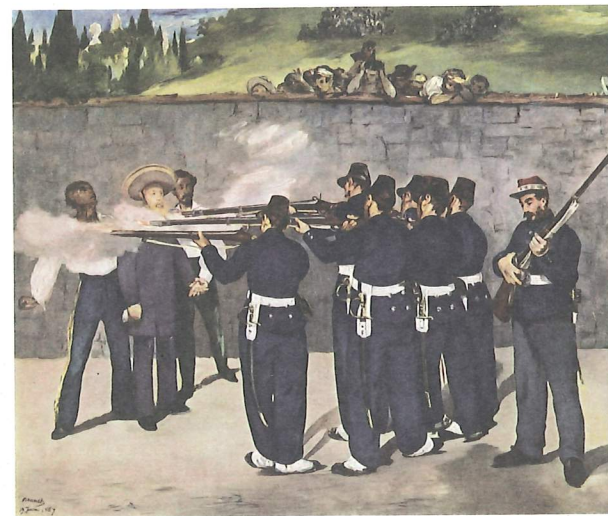
In the twenty-first century we are surrounded by works of art that have social or political content, but in fact, this is a fairly recent phenomenon in the history of Western art. In earlier eras, artists who strove to have their art openly embody a social conscience were few and far between. This was largely due to the patronage situation for artists up until the mid-nineteenth century or so, when art for art's sake began and the artist was freed up to starve in his or her garret. Previously it would not have gone well for an artist advocating for the underdog when being paid by an aristocrat or the church. There was Goya, as a notable exception, of course, particularly with his *Disasters of War* etchings and *The Third of May* (1808), an oil painting depicting the martyrdom of Spanish freedom fighters at the hands of one of Napoleon's firing squads.



Francisco Goya, *The Third of May 1808*, 1814, oil on canvas. Collection of the Prado Museum, Madrid.

Edouard Manet, generally associated with the French Impressionists, quoted from this work of Goya's when creating his own group of paintings

about the Execution of Maximilian in Mexico (the event was in 1867, and Manet's works were completed during the next two years).



Edouard Manet, *The Execution of Emperor Maximilian*, 1867-9, oil on canvas. Collection of the Kunsthalle Mannheim, Mannheim, Germany.

Contemporary with him (just a little older) and also in Paris was Honoré Daumier, a brilliant satirist and caricaturist of men in the legal profession and politicians.



Honoré Daumier, plate from *Les Gens de Justice*, 1840s, lithograph.

With the dawn of the twentieth century and the spread of the avant garde in art, artists with social consciences began bearing witness to injustices in

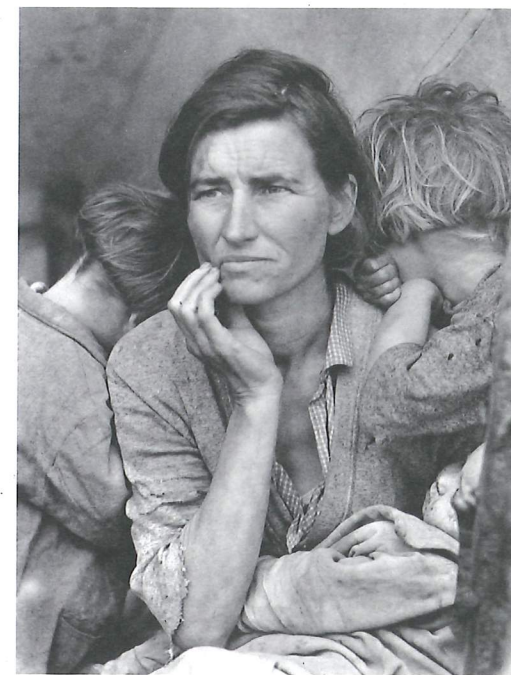
their own times and circumstances. The German artist Kathe Kollwitz (1867-1945) paved the way with her anti-war work followed the German Dada artists in raking politicians and the upper classes over the coals.



Kathe Kollwitz, *Seeds for Planting Should not be Ground*, 1942, lithograph.

The Russian avant garde harnessed their collective talents to the wheel of utopian socialism, and in Mexico and the USA in the 1930s, socialist realism was born, which would be the approach approved for art in the Maoist era in China, especially in the Cultural Revolution of the 1970s. *Guernica*, painted by Picasso in 1937, the most famous "protest" work of art in the first half of the twentieth century, depicted the bombing of women and children in a Basque village by German and Italian forces during World War II.

Depression-era photographers such as Walker Evans and Dorothea Lange produced strong images that conveyed the economic devastation of the time as it affected masses of disenfranchised Americans, most particularly of the Dust Bowl exodus.



Dorothea Lange, *Migrant Mother*, 1936, photograph.

Later, in the 1960s, photo-journalism created and disseminated hard-hitting images that galvanized millions of people around issues such as the Vietnam War and black civil rights in the US.

Modern and contemporary artists around the world have moved aggressively into the political and social realms. Whereas modernist art of the 1960s and 70s and Minimalist art from the same time were both self-referential, artists of the post-modern age became free to embrace any kind of social concerns in their practices. In fact, these days art that does *not* make reference to the social is now sometimes shunned and given negative monikers in the art press, such as zombie formalism and crapstraction.

All of this looking back is intended to provide an art historical and contemporary art context for the practice of Deborah Koenker, moving

as she has in her unfolding career, from earthy abstract sculptural installations and meditative, investigative work in printmaking, into exploring photography, installation (at times with audio components), and embroidery (with its links and references to women and women's labour) that is intense and emotional with its social content. With her exploration of photography that is part portrait, part social document, Koenker is furthering the tradition of revolutionary photographers such as Robert Frank, who changed how we conceived of a photographic portrait.

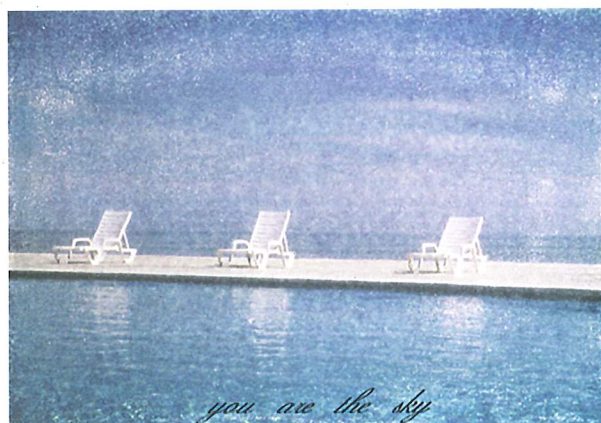
Trained in the 1970s in drawing, printmaking, and sculpture, Koenker arrived in Vancouver to live in 1973, not knowing anyone. Within a short time she became one of the founding members of the Malaspina Printmakers Workshop, which opened in 1975, and where she remained active as workshop director for many years. She went back to art school in 1985 for an MFA in sculpture/installation (at Claremont Graduate University in Claremont, California). By this time, feminism had come to the fore in academia and the art world, and Koenker embraced the issues involved.

It seems that printmaking, with its democratic notion of the multiple, and its basis so often in communities of artists, can sometimes form a fertile springboard for artists to move into other forms of artistic expression. Koenker gradually stopped producing prints for the most part, and also sculptures *per se*, as discrete objects, and became increasingly interested in installation. The beautiful and arresting six-foot-diameter piece made from driftwood titled *Rootball* in her *Bar-Ba-Loot* show at the OR Gallery in Vancouver in 1992 was the last example of her former aesthetic-object-based practice.



Deborah Koenker, *Rootball*, from the artist's *Barbaloot* installation 1992, driftwood.

In the late 1990s Koenker made two series of prints, *Path of a Body* (1996-7), and *Punctuation* (1999-2002). These were gentle works, with the small bits of texts in *Path of a Body* encouraging the viewer to “rest when tired,” for example. The specific meaning of the punctuation work is elusive, although the images of old-fashioned floral fabrics juxtaposed with semi colons, colons, parentheses and the like, were straightforward images to read visually. Perhaps these prints were linked to the notion of pausing, as punctuation is often about setting up rests between words and phrases, and the soothing floral fabrics are almost soporific.



Deborah Koenker, *You are the sky*, *Path of a Body* series, 1996-7, transfer print, 8½ x 12 in. (20.9 x 30.4 cm)



Deborah Koenker, *Adrift*, 1999, installation view at the Richmond Art Gallery.

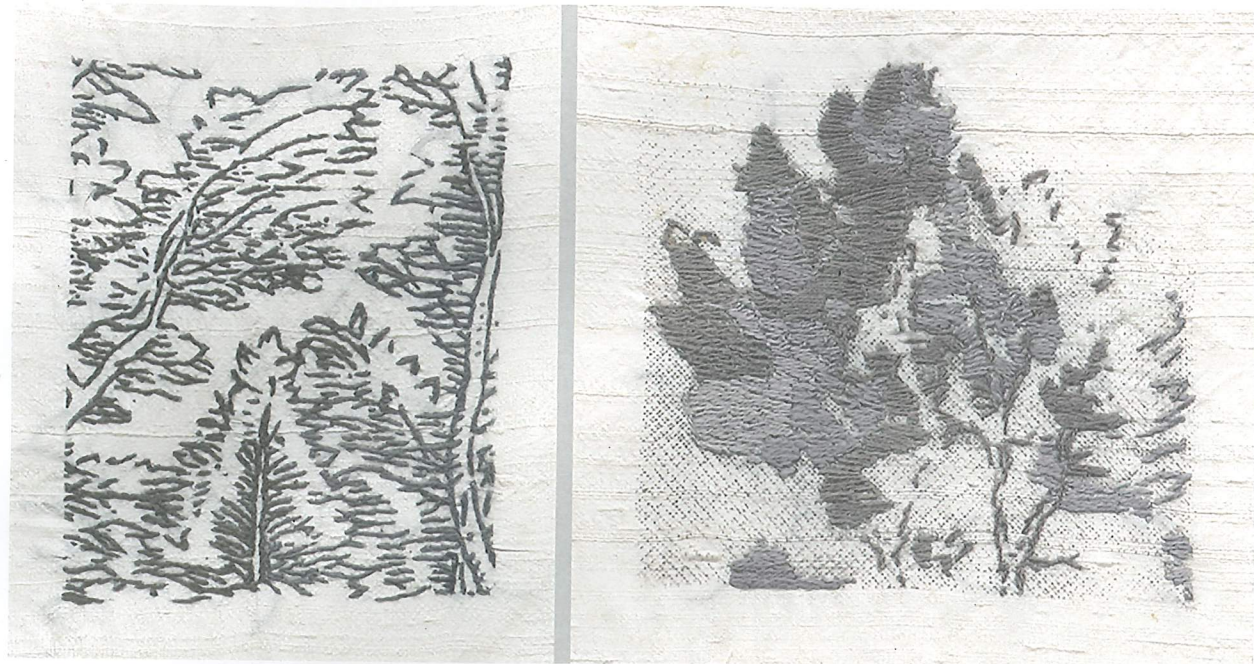


Deborah Koenker, *Vingette*, *Punctuation* series, 1999, transfer print, 6 x 10½ in. (16.2 x 26.9 cm)

In 1999 the artist produced a full-scale installation for her solo show *Adrift*, at Open Space in Victoria, BC, and at the Richmond Art Gallery, Richmond, BC. In this piece the viewers meandered their way between curved walls made of white paper, illuminated from behind. A strip of black linear images at eye level ran along the undulating

paper walls. The theme for this was chronic but invisible illness, transformed into the metaphor of a physical journey for the gallery-goer.

She had learned various embroidery stitches when a child, and turned to these abilities in a piece she began in 2002, that is still unfinished and ongoing. Titled *Learning to Draw*, it is comprised of small squares of white silk onto which the artist transferred details from drawings and engravings by various Old Masters. She has then been embroidering over these with this traditionally female medium, called needlework in the nineteenth century. The components are highly beautiful and Koenker subtly makes her point about the fate of so much of women's labour as artists as having disappeared, while the more highly valued male artists' work in drawing and painting was preserved in museums. Koenker has



Deborah Koenker, *Learning to Draw: illustration for The Satyric scene in L'Architettura (Sebastian Sergio)*, 2002, work in progress, transfer print and hand embroidery on duppioni silk, 5½x 4½ in. (13.9 x 11.4 cm); Deborah Koenker, *Learning to Draw: Landscape with a man killed by a snake, #1 (Nicolas Poussin)*, 2002, work in progress, transfer print and hand embroidery on duppioni silk, 4¼x 4¼ in. (10.7 x 10.7 cm).



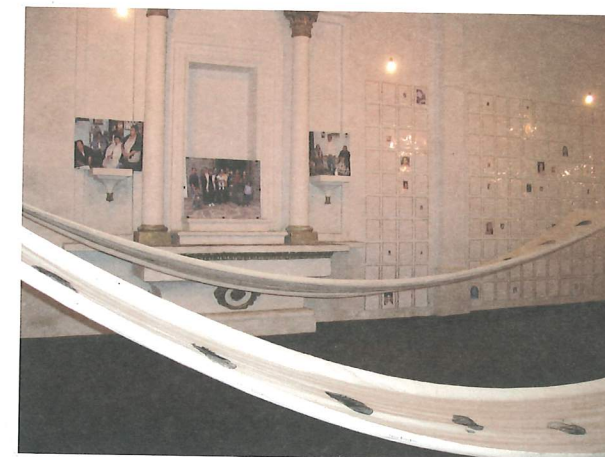
Deborah Koenker, *Learning to Draw: engraving after Titian drawing from Encyclopedie by Diderot and d'Alembert, #1*, 2002, work in progress, transfer print and hand embroidery on duppioni silk, 4¾ x 6¼ in. (11.4 x 15.8 cm).



Deborah Koenker, *Learning to Draw: Landscape Sketch #1 (Jean-Honoré Fragonard)*, 2002, work in progress, transfer print and hand embroidery on duppioni silk, 5¼x 6½ in. (13.3 x 16.5 cm).

continued to explore sewing and embroidering with textiles in her practice. With socially oriented work in contemporary art often the materials become part of the message (to paraphrase Marshall McLuhan). We might consider the Chinese dissident artist Ai Weiwei, for instance,

and his use of wooden stools or real life-vests cast off on the beaches in Turkey by Syrian migrants, and other unusual art materials in his pieces, which call attention to and comment on current issues from around the world.



Deborah Koenker, *Las Desaparecidas*, 2007, installed at the Templo de San Antonio Centre Cultural, Tapalpa, Jalisco, Mexico.

Koenker's overall journey as an artist has involved a kind of crossing over, referred to in the title of this essay – a crossing over from traditional to non-traditional, even political media, and from primarily formalist or aesthetic concerns to social ones, although she has continued to embrace the beautiful.

In 2003, building on her work in installation, and her knowledge of the Spanish language and connections in Mexico, the artist began work on a Mexican-based project that would take three years to complete, and would involve eighty-four volunteer participants. Titled *Las Desaparecidas* (in English, *The Missing Ones*), the work stemmed from the horrific situation of the many women murdered in Ciudad Juárez in Mexico. By now the news coverage of these murders has made the situation common knowledge internationally. (It was perhaps described in most dispassionate yet gruesome and emotionally disturbing detail in the massive work of fiction called *2666*, by the late Chilean-born writer Roberto Bolaño, published posthumously in 2004.) Koenker felt compelled to deal with these murders head on in an art project. She was able to meet with a group of people in Tapalpa, in Jalisco, Mexico, and worked

to win their trust, so that they agreed to use the images of their own fingerprints as embroidery patterns. They then met to stitch as a group, hand embroidering onto long bands of unbleached cotton over greatly enlarged transfer prints of their own fingerprints as patterns. The embroideries were installed at the Galeria Manuel Felguerez, at the Universidad Autonoma Metropolitana in Mexico City in 2006 in a solo show. (The work was subsequently shown in four other venues: the Kathrin Cawein Gallery, Pacific University, Forest Grove, Oregon in 2007; the Guggenheim Gallery, Chapman University, Orange, California

in 2007; the Templo de San Antonio Centre Cultural, Tapalpa, Jalisco, Mexico in 2007; and the Richmond Art Gallery, Richmond, BC in 2008.)

Perhaps the most redolent of these several installations of *Las Desaparecidas* was the one in the deconsecrated church in Tapalpa, Jalisco, in which the draped and suspended lengths of fabric alluded to liturgical vestments and altar cloths. The large scale of the work is extremely important as it gives the work gravitas and commands attention the way fingerprints at their actual size would not. Fingerprints themselves are loaded notions. On the one hand, they identify each one of us as ourselves alone. But they are used by police everywhere in databases of criminals and of missing persons. So they become fraught images, and our minds provide the more negative associations as we contemplate the work.

With her accomplishment of winning the trust of the people in Tapalpa to work with her on *Las Desaparecidas*, Koenker created a work that opened up a new direction for her practice that



Deborah Koenker, ribbons at the Basílica of Our Lady of Guadalupe Shrine, Mexico City, 2012.

she has continued to explore. As well, she has been fortunate to travel to residencies such as the Canada Council's Paris Studio in 2011, and in 2015 to artists' residencies in Cadiz and Barcelona in Spain. She continues to take photographs, especially when travelling, and often creates fairly large-scale, thematic montages using her digital images.

With her current installation, *Grapes and Tortillas*, at the Kelowna Art Gallery, Deborah Koenker set out to provide gallery-goers with an intense taste of life in Mexico, with its colour and vibrancy, the people's joy in food and family, and their religious devotion. At the same time, she wanted to include references to the darker issues surrounding, for example, the crossing of the American border. So the exhibition includes a seventy-one-foot-long mural of colour photographs Koenker made in 2008 of the border fence/wall between Mexico and the US. These images form a stark contrast to the photographic portraits included on other walls. In conjunction with the fence/wall mural, Koenker has included on the wall some excerpts from a



Deborah Koenker, vineyard netting, Naramata, 2015.



poem (published in a book with the same title that includes other texts and materials) by Juan Felipe Herrera called *187 REASONS MEXICANOS CAN'T CROSS THE BORDER*. There is a bittersweet quality to this poem with its biting humour overlaid onto a tragic social situation.

Bisecting the entire gallery space and hanging in a vertical plane from the ceiling is a giant curtain made from vineyard netting that has been interwoven with 2000 lengths of colourful ribbons (one for each of the temporary workers placed here in the Okanagan each year), making reference to a common devotional ritual at shrines in Mexico. This piece forms an enormous soft sculpture, somewhat in the vein of Koenker's *Las Desaparecidas*. It both dominates and divides the space and sets the tone for the overall installation. Koenker has titled the piece *La Frontera* (The Border), as it is also a metaphor for the cultural and language barrier the Mexican workers face while they are here.

In one alcove to the left of the gallery's entrance Koenker has set up various materials and photographic murals that make reference to a typical Mexican kitchen. Domestic spaces like this are the warm centres of a home, and where conversations go on, as well as cooking. The notion of food continually touched on throughout the exhibition is a loaded one, as the Mexican crops and their cycle of renewal is under threat by GMO seeds. Koenker intends this kitchen facsimile as a tribute to a woman known as Doña Vicky, an activist from Oaxaca who was a leader in stopping a McDonald's restaurant from opening in 2002 in the historic town square of her city. Koenker has included references to food in the exhibition as it is a hot issue in Mexico, where their ancient cycle of planting and harvesting is under threat by GMO

seeds that have suicide genes, preventing them from being reproduced in subsequent seasons.

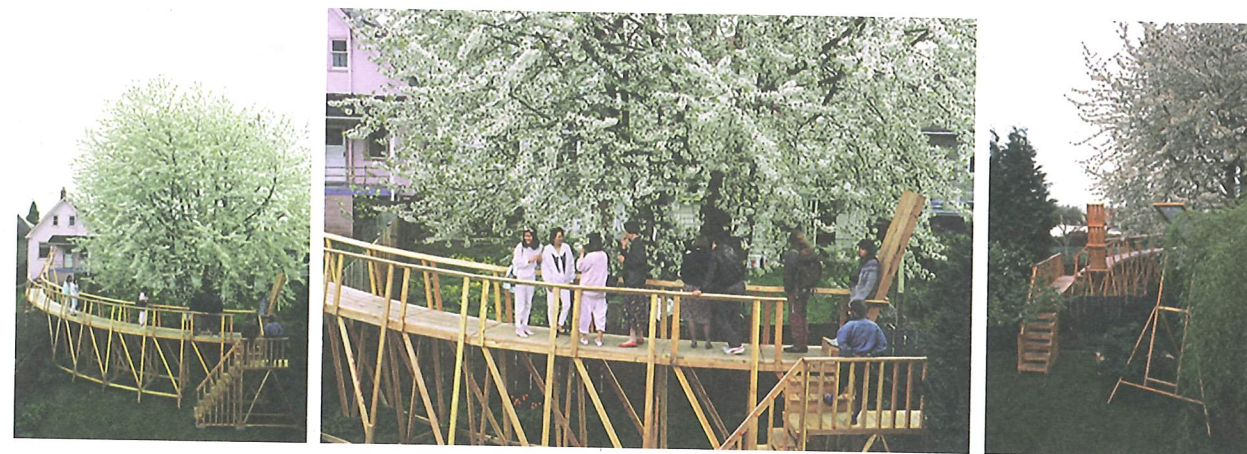
Across the gallery space, on the other side of the net, a sort of quasi-shrine has been set up, with wooden chairs facing a large image of the Virgin of Guadalupe, the patron saint of Mexico. On each chair the artist has placed a votive candle and a printed enlarged reproduction of a Loteria card. Real Marigold blossoms, which will be refreshed throughout the duration of the exhibition, will be set out on the shrine. A selection of old Okanagan wooden orchard ladders has been assembled in this area as well.

Koenker also created a playlist for the exhibition, comprised of music that one might hear while visiting Mexico, which plays over the sound system of the gallery space. These include tracks by Lhasa de Sela and Lila Downs. In a darkened area she is looping some of her own images, projected as stills.

The artist's achievement with this installation has not been an easy one: to convey the culture of another place to gallery visitors here, and to do so with accuracy, respect, and sensitivity. Her main goal with this aspect of the exhibition was to show audiences the richness of the culture in Mexico that the temporary workers miss when they are here, away from their families. Koenker hopes that viewers come away with an enhanced awareness of the real, true cost of food, and who is paying the price for it.

Koenker has the unerring ability as an artist to transform base materials into vehicles of thought and emotion. She bypasses our internal gatekeeper and penetrates deeply into our consciousness with her art. Within the trajectory of her own artistic

career, she has made a shift from a materials-based practice to one of social commentary and activism. With the notion of crossing over comes the idea of connection, and this is another of Koenker's skills – connecting with the people who are the basis of her research and the subjects for her work, and connecting with the gallery goer. This can be traced back in her practice to 1987 with an elevated wooden walkway she built with her husband, architect Roberto Pacheco, for viewing the cherry tree in her back garden. This structure also connected the adjoining back gardens of the neighbours, and not just physically, but at a deep human level – aesthetically and spiritually. This would seem to still be the goal in Koenker's art and it is one that she so successfully achieves.



Deborah Koenker and Roberto Pacheco, *The Cherry Tree Project*, 1987, three adjacent Vancouver gardens.

Liz Wylie has been curator of the Kelowna Art Gallery since 2007. As well as her work as a curator, she has been writing reviews and articles on contemporary and historical Canadian art since 1977. Her recent publications include monographs on the Canadian artists Keith Langergraber, John Hartman, Bill Rodgers, Christos Dikeakos, John Hall, and Landon Mackenzie. Wylie holds an MFA in art history from Concordia University in Montreal.