

Whitehorse Star, August 14, 2009

## Visiting artist weaves immigration theme into his work

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By [Justine Davidson](#) on August 14, 2009 at 3:00 pm



Photo by Whitehorse Star

ARTISTIC AMIGOS - Haruko Okano (left) of Vancouver and Cesar Damian of Pachuca, Mexico are two of seven artists in the Yukon as part of the Llama Project. Damian uses photography to explore themes of human migration while Okano uses natural materials to build whimsical, ephemeral creations. Photo By Kieran Oudshoorn

For Cesar Damian, finding out he would need a visa to enter Canada just weeks before he was scheduled to arrive in the Yukon for an artists' residency was hardly the most difficult travel arrangement he had ever faced.

Seven years ago, the Mexican photographer smuggled himself over the Mexico/U.S. border at Nogales, one of the most notorious underground crossings along the heavily guarded frontier.

He didn't do it to look for work as so many do, but to understand what it was to emigrate under cover of darkness, travelling at the mercy of the hired smugglers, or coyotes, who transport hundreds of people in to the U.S. from Mexico every day.

"That night, I become a photographer," he says of the experience, "a real photographer. It was a very hard experience. And it was beautiful."

In the seven years since that night, Damian has focused on immigration as the main driver of his art.

In his last project, *The Ones Who are Left Behind*, he turned his lens on the wives and children of migrant workers; families who live in "ghost towns" devoid of working-age men, waiting for money orders, phone calls and, most precious of all, homecomings.

In spite of the Mexicans' famous familiarity and even though he is Mexican himself, Damian worked hard to be allowed into the lives of the families he photographed, says Joyce Majiski, a Whitehorse-based artist who stayed with Damian as he worked on the project.

"People don't just say, 'Come in, look at our sadness, look at our poverty, photograph it,'" she says. "It was a slow process."

Now Damian is in Whitehorse as part of the Llama Project, an artistic endeavour begun in 2007 "as a way of bringing together a diversity of professional artists from different countries and cultures to share ideas, stories and experiences with a diversity of community members."

The Canadian ethos is interesting to him, Damian says, "because in Canada, they have the custom of receiving people as immigrants ... but in the U.S. with Mexicans - and also in Mexico - it is very hard because we don't have that custom, that culture."

The recent edict passed down by the Canadian Immigration department which requires Mexican, as well as Czech, travellers to get a visa before coming to the country has changed some Mexicans' view of Canada.

“We had a very good connection with Canada,” he says of the Canadian-Mexican relationship, “now, maybe not so much.”

This year’s Llama Project, entitled *Voz/Voice: The arts of resistance and resilience*, began in Pachuca, Mexico last January and moved to the Yukon last month with the arrival of Damian and Vancouver artist Haruko Okano.

The works they create while they are here will focus on themes of environment and sense of place.

“No es mi primera vez en Canada, aunque despues de estes cinco dias en Yukon, tengo un nuevo concepto de naturaleza, de pureza de la tierra,” Damian writes of his first days in the territory.

“This is not my first time in Canada, but after these five days in the Yukon, I have a new concept of nature, of the purity of the Earth.”

“There is no wilderness in Mexico,” says Okano, who spent two months in Mexico earlier this year. “There is nature, but there is no wilderness.”

Okano is a visual artist who works primarily with found and natural materials.

While she is here, she will be giving a number of artists’ talks on using “ephemeral” materials and the meaning of environmental art.

She calls on examples created by her contemporaries, of art that purifies the environment it is installed in, or removes waste from and turns it into something beautiful or arresting.

“Artists can make overt statements,” she urges. “They can be activists. They can make art that asks questions.”

Overlooking Craig Lake, Okano will build a “window of time” she says, a frame made out of found, beaver-stripped wood. At the bottom, she will carve the words “Remember: gone is gone.”

Okano will be joined by other members of the Llama project for a roundtable discussion on environmental art at The Old Fire Hall on Wednesday, Aug. 19.

She will be giving her artist’s talk at the Arts Underground on the evening of Friday, Aug. 21.

Five more artists will be participating in the Llama Project, and events will be announced throughout the fall.