

Q&A How artist Camilo Ontiveros acquired the belongings of a DACA deportee and what he did with them

By **Carolina A. Miranda**

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In 2012, Camilo Ontiveros attempted to extract a cubic meter of soil from a hillside in the Mexican state of Nayarit and display it at the Hammer Museum as part of that year's "Made in L.A." biennial. The Los Angeles artist was interested in bringing something Mexican to the United States — literally, a piece of earth to display in a museum.

"Everything is born from soil," he says. "Soil is life. How hard is it to bring something that is alive here? Something that gives so much life?"

The answer is: very hard.

Due to all manner of bureaucratic roadblocks — partly because the soil sample was above the [U.S. Department of Agriculture's](#) 3-pound limit — he was never able to bring the piece of Mexican earth into Los Angeles. So for the show at the Hammer, he instead displayed a voluminous binder of correspondence with the U.S. government agencies that had denied his petition.

"El Pedón," as the piece was titled, gets at a long-running focus in the artist's work: the economic, cultural and other exchanges that occur between the U.S. and Mexico.

"I don't deal with the border literally," he says. Instead, he focuses more at the idea of "exchange — more with migration and labor, the labor that migrants are engaged in, in adaption."

For his latest work, part of Pacific Standard Time: LA/LA, Ontiveros is contending with the charged nature of migration at a particularly intense political moment.

For the exhibition “[Home — So Different, So Appealing](#),” currently on view at the [Los Angeles County Museum of Art](#), the artist gathered the belongings of [Juan Manuel Montes](#) — the first recipient of the [Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals](#) program (known as DACA) to be deported under the [Trump](#) administration — and bound the objects with rope into an improbable tower that stands at the entrance to the gallery.

The piece was rendered more poignant when the Trump administration announced that it planned to phase out DACA.

“Now it’s not just one person being deported,” says Ontiveros. “Now it’s 800,000 people fearing deportation.”

Ontiveros arrived in the U.S. at the age of 15 without papers but became a legal U.S. resident in the late 1990s. He is quiet and mild-mannered. Yet in his art he has shown a bold exploration of forms, and of challenging the social and political status quo.

In this lightly edited conversation, the artist discusses how he came to be in possession of Montes’ belongings and the aspects of his own life he sees reflected in these very intimate objects.





Artist Camilo Ontiveros with a sculpture he created with the belongings of a DACA recipient. (Irfan Khan / Los Angeles Times)

You began work on your piece “Temporary Storage: The Belongings of Juan Manuel Montes” months before Donald Trump’s DACA decision. What inspired it?

I don’t know why I saw it coming — the way Trump has been dealing with a lot of things, not just immigration. There has been a lot of skepticism about DACA since it started. The question of, “How can I give up my information? Then the government can pick me up any time.” It’s really painful and really devastating for the immigrant community that the government can just take something away like that.

How did you get access to Montes’ things?

I contacted someone who was working with lawyers who are representing Juan Manuel Montes. She put me in touch with [his mother]. She was really taken by the idea of presenting Juan Manuel's case through a piece of art. I sent her pictures of what I did before and said I wanted to do something similar. She was more than willing to participate.

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They are the belongings of someone who is really vulnerable, someone who is taken away.

— Camilo Ontiveros, artist





An installation view of Juan Manuel Montes' belongings in "Temporary Storage" in "Home: So Different, So Appealing," at LACMA. (Irfan Khan / Los Angeles Times)

What was it like to sift through his personal belongings?

As I'm taking things away, it kind of hit me. It became more real. He left the room and was deported and his mom left the room as is. For me to come take that away — it was mixed feelings. I'm taking away his belongings. For her, she will see that absence. They are the belongings of someone who is really vulnerable, someone who is taken away. I have mixed feelings about it.

The Trump administration has said that Montes wasn't deported, but that instead he left the country voluntarily. His lawyers filed witness statements that said he was forced across the border into Mexico by immigration agents. Montes will be allowed to temporarily reenter the country later this year for the court case that could determine his status, but what is your view on his situation?

I don't know what happened. I've heard both sides. But what brought me to Juan Manuel is I see a reflection of me. I was here illegally. I went through the same kinds of fears growing up. I was a student. I went to college. I pursued a master's degree. And if it wasn't for me having papers and a little bit of status here, I wouldn't have been able to do all of that.

I arrived here illegally like everybody else. I crossed with — I think my grandfather paid someone. I used somebody else's papers. It was this business people in Tijuana had. I had to go there and learn my new identity in six hours: where I was born, where I went to school. Then I crossed through immigration.

The current sculpture was inspired by a piece you made as a graduate student at UCLA in 2009 — in which you piled up your belongings and bound them with rope. What motivated you to make that piece?

I'd been working with bundling and rope a lot. I was interested in the objects you'd see in the backs of trucks being transported from L.A. to Tijuana. I was interested in the merger of economies and cultures. I deal with that in some of my work.

And I was thinking about movement and being able to pack all of your belongings and be ready to move. This was during election time. Obama was running. Deportations were going on. That piece was all of my belongings —

everything I owned at that moment. I was renting a room and I packed my room and put it there.

This thing weighed a ton. I wouldn't be able to put it on my shoulders. I was thinking about movement in this absurd way. I was playing with the same absurdity of a law.

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Camilo Ontiveros first made a version of "Temporary Storage" at UCLA in 2009, featuring all of his own belongings. (Camilo Ontiveros)

Why address this in an art museum?

It brings the issue up in a different platform. It brings the issue up in this stage of the art institution. It allows for a conversation. Though I don't know that the art world is very prone to have these kinds of discussions. They want to talk about objects.

‘Home — So Different, So Appealing’

Where: Los Angeles County Museum of Art, 5905 Wilshire Blvd., Los Angeles

When: Through Oct. 15

Info: lacma.org

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