

Refugee Women Tell Their Stories of Pain and Beauty in Sofía Córdova's New Film
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Artist Sofía Córdova prepares Alejandra for filming 'dawn_chorusiii: the fruit they don't have here,' where she and other women tell their stories of coming to the U.S. as refugees. (Chani Bockwinkel)

Alejandra hadn't planned on leaving Guatemala, but she didn't really have a choice.

She had moved to the capital from her rural hometown to get proper schooling for her son, who is deaf. But living in Guatemala City was too expensive as a single mom, so she left and put her own dream of studying law on hold. More hardships followed when a fishing company began dumping waste into the river that sustained her community. Alejandra campaigned to put pressure on the local government to regulate the pollution, but the powerful company had the politicians in its pocket. She knew she was in danger, so she embarked on an arduous journey that took her through Mexico, into I.C.E. custody and, eventually, to the Bay Area, where she's currently studying and trying to establish a better life for herself and her family.

Alejandra's typically private about the details of how she got here, but she did something unexpected and responded to a call-out from Oakland artist **Sofía Córdova**, who reached out to

local nonprofits to find refugee women willing to tell their stories in her new film.

“I looked at it as an opportunity to do something for myself, because I’m a mom of three kids and that takes up most of my time,” Alejandra tells me in Spanish. “This was something just for me. I was able to express my pain, my story, and talk about the things I remember fondly from my hometown. And also what made me immigrate here.”

Alejandra is one of the six women featured in Córdova’s new video installation, *dawn_chorusiii: the fruit they don’t have here*, screening at [41 Ross](#), the [Chinese Culture Center](#)’s art gallery in San Francisco Chinatown.

The hour-long film plays like a dreamlike version of a documentary, where the women’s stories weave in and out of one another, interspersed with scripted lines, Córdova’s original musical score and animations by [Kate Rhoades](#). Instead of a linear sequence of events, we get impressionistic, emotionally potent portraits that mix tender recollections of the people and places the women left behind with harrowing accounts of fleeing abuse, gang violence, extreme poverty and political persecution.

Córdova planted seeds for the film in 2018, when the San Francisco Arts Commission invited her to create a public art project about sanctuary cities, *A Body Reorganized*. Through that work, she met Tian Shi, who came to the U.S. as an asylum seeker after China’s [’89 Democracy Movement](#). And through him, she connected with one of the women who would later appear in *dawn_chorusiii*: Xiang Li, another Chinese dissident who wanted to tell her story of being imprisoned during China’s [709 crackdown](#) in 2015, when police mass arrested lawyers and activists who fought for minority rights and religious freedoms.

Struck by Li’s story of escape and survival, Córdova wanted to give more women a platform to be heard, and to create an international conversation that connects Bay Area residents from China, Guatemala, El Salvador and Colombia. Her idea resonated with the Chinese Culture Center’s vision of building solidarity among different communities through art.

“Chinatown has always been a safe haven for new immigrants,” says curator Hoi Leung. “And actually some of even the more marginalized groups of immigrants do find home in Chinatown. ... It’s about being a kind of resilient neighborhood.”

Through organizations like [Gum Moon Women’s Residence](#) and [El/La Para Translatinas](#), Córdova met more women who were eager to tell their stories, including Alejandra. They began the project with a trauma-focused grounding session led by therapist group [Yellow Chair Collective](#), and psychotherapists were on hand throughout the process if any of the women needed additional support.

“They helped us a lot,” says Alejandra.

dawn_chorusiii: the fruit they don’t have here opens with the women recalling the landscapes

of their homelands, conjuring sensory memories of climbing mango trees, swimming in rivers and admiring expansive greenery. (The film takes its name from the story a woman from Colombia tells about family outings for ice cream with flavors of passionfruit, curuba, soursop and guava—tastes that conjure the feeling of home.)

“It was really important for me that even though there’s obviously a lot of hardship experienced in the homelands of a lot of these people, there’s also a lot of great beauty, and a lot of really important people, places and things left behind,” Córdoba says.

The artist wanted to avoid falling back on tropes like the hellscape home country versus the American land of opportunity. Arriving in the United States certainly wasn’t like that for Alejandra, who, in one of the film’s most intense moments, takes out a shoebox where she still keeps the aluminum blanket from her time in I.C.E. detention as a reminder of what she’s endured.

“The image of the United States in my country is very different from the reality,” Alejandra says of why she decided to share her journey with the public. “Everyone says over there people will help you, everything will be OK. But the process isn’t like that.”

That was an important angle for Córdoba now that media attention on inhumane treatment of asylum seekers has dwindled. Though Donald Trump is no longer in the White House, many of his controversial policies, including “[remain in Mexico](#),” are still intact.

“It is actually materially the same,” says Córdoba. “It’s really important to highlight that these are also not the problems of specific leaders, but they’re the problems of grand national ideologies. And so as long as this country keeps moving in the direction that it’s moving, these problems and their inhumanity will remain the same.”

Sharing her story with Córdoba was therapeutic for Alejandra, but when it came time to see the finished work at the opening reception of *dawn_chorusiii* on Dec. 3, doubt and regret crept in. “I cried and said, ‘Why did I say that? Oh no! How terrible!’ There are things that one wants to keep to oneself,” she says.

But those feeling began to dissipate when she saw how much people appreciated the film. “People were asking me questions and I started to feel better and more calm,” she says. “But at first I was overwhelmed.”

The film plays on a loop during gallery hours, and viewers can sit on a bench or lounge on one of the gallery’s pillows, dropping in and out of the story as they please. But even after the exhibition ends, the work will have a lasting impact on Córdoba and the women who collaborated with her.

“We all have these really, I think, very sweet, very real friendships as a result,” says Córdoba. “To use a word that I hate, it felt so genuine, these connections. I feel very bonded to all of them, and I feel very grateful to them how much they shared. It’s kind of like we’re bound for life in a very real way. I text them pretty regularly.”

‘dawn_chorusiii: the fruit they don’t have here’ is on view at 41 Ross through Jan. 29, 2022.