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*Judithe Hernández: A Dream Is the Shadow of Something Real*  
by Exhibition at the Museum of Latin American Art (Long  
Beach, CA) (review)

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## Art Reviews

*Judithe Hernández: A Dream Is the Shadow of Something Real*. Exhibition at the  
Museum of Latin American Art (Long Beach, CA), August 11, 2018–February  
17, 2019.

A founding figure of Los Angeles muralism, Judithe Hernández’s career as an artist spans forty-five years, and she currently maintains a prolific studio and public art practice in L.A. She was the first female member of Los Four, the arts collective that brought Chicana art to the mainstream art world and broke the museum barrier with a major exhibition at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art (LACMA) in 1974. It is perhaps not a coincidence, then, that this is the MOLAA’s first solo exhibition of work by a Chicana; her work is a fitting entry in a museum nominally dedicated to Latin American art, since many of these paintings take the Chihuahuan desert as their backdrop. Like the Los Angeles Hammer Museum’s recent exhibit *Radical Women: Latin American Art, 1960–1985*, which featured works by female artists from both sides of the US–Latin American border, *A Dream Is the Shadow of Something Real* fluidly transgresses American national boundaries, underscoring the currents of power, shared violences, and female roles and modes of representation that flow freely across them. The fact that many of the women in the paintings appear as if they could be Hernández herself as a young woman brings home the gruesome realities she depicts. Her work crosses borders in multiple senses: between the living and the dead, wakefulness and dream states, Mexico and the United States, and the human and the nonhuman.

Designed by Mexican architect Manuel Rosen and constructed in 1996, the MOLAA, with its towering ceilings, contemporary design, and gently curving walls, provides a suitably spare and expansive backdrop for Hernández’s work. The exhibit prominently features the Juárez Series, a sequence of vividly hued pastel paintings that explores the murder of thousands of young female maquiladora workers in the Mexican border city of Juárez. According to a statement by the artist that appears on her website, “Since the early 1990’s the murder of young female factory workers in Juárez, Mexico has become epidemic. The number of victims could be as high as 1500–2000. Since the murders began, the Mexican government has been led by six different presidents. In that time no significant investigations have yielded any serious prosecutions of the perpetrators. Until the deaths of these young women become a priority for the Mexican authorities by finding and punishing the criminals responsible, this series will continue.”

Paintings in the Juárez Series range from the beautiful to the forensic to the macabre, and shuttle between the living to the dead, the ancient and the contemporary, often all within a single work. *The Desert Where Dreams Die* depicts a woman in a traditional Mexican embroidered dress and shawl, her hair parted and pulled back in braids pinned up with a corona of flowers. She holds a bouquet of light purple lilies—a frequent symbol in Hernández’s work, they denote death—and regards the camera with a canny, sidelong glance. Of all the elements in the painting—moody clouded skies, blue deer clustered and feeding around the chair in which she sits—it is her gaze, which seems to view beyond life, in serene contemplation of the afterlife, and the tilt of her head that pull the viewer in. Her seated pose shows that she will not be running away from death, but instead awaits its inevitability. In this way, Hernández’s depiction of the tragedy of the femicides in Juárez contains an uncanny sense of beauty—the beauty of the landscape, of the subject, and of her stoic approach to her own impending death. Underscoring this inevitability are the deer grazing around the seated subject, three of whose faces are already skulls, though their bodies appear to be living. The comparison between human and animal forces the question: are women in Juárez prey, and are even the living already marked to die young? The sense of injustice as well as the subject’s naked vulnerability are as plain and vivid as the colors and simple imagery that Hernández spreads across her canvas.

Another arresting painting from the Juárez Series, *Santa Desconocida* (Figure 1) also depicts a woman on her own, this one reclining on her back on the desert floor in front of a patch of saguaro cactus. Her flowered top and steeped fingers, whose extended length resembles the cactus behind them, remind the viewer that her remains will soon be buried beneath the earth, when she prematurely reenters the cycle of death and rebirth. Around her blue-cast neck and torso twists a graceful red ribbon, which elevates the top of the figure’s body up off the earth like a scene of levitation or heavenly ascent; pulling the ribbon is a mysterious red hand that extends from the left side of the painting. The demon-like red female figure it belongs to appears in several other paintings in the exhibit (Figure 2), and appears to form part of Hernández’s pantheon of death.

Of Hernández, the legendary art historian Margarita Nieto has noted, “(her work) speaks of the problematic and ephemeral situation of woman hidden in her masks of roles. The narrative quality of Hernández’ paintings speaks to those masks in an extraordinary combination of darkness and color, enhanced by a subconscious precognition of a mythic past.” The masks most present in these paintings are those of death and victimhood. Like the work of some of the best Chicana writers and filmmakers—Helena María Viramontes’s “The Cariboo Café” comes to mind, or Cristina Henríquez’s “Everything Is Far From Here,” or documentarian



**Figure 1.** *La Santa Desconocida de la serie Juárez / The Unknown Saint from the Juárez Series*. Judithe Hernández, 2017. Pastel on paper, 30 x 88 inches. Courtesy: the artist.



**Figure 2.** *Les demoiselles d'barrio / Maidens of the Barrio*. Judithe Hernández, 2013. Pastel and mixed media on canvas. Diptych; 60 x 80 inches. Museum of Latin American Art (MOLAA) Collection. In memory of Mr. and Mrs. Peter C. Hernández (M.2016.004). Courtesy: MOLAA.

Lourdes Portillo’s *Señorita Extraviada*—Hernández’s paintings bring a female gaze to the particularly gruesome violence suffered by women on the US-Mexican border, lifting a curtain on the reality of the atrocities they experience and reminding us in highly personal terms of the role official complicity has played in their deaths. In *A Dream Is the Shadow of Something Real*, Hernández vividly summons their ghosts; we would do well to wake up to and confront the reality she depicts in this lingeringly powerful exhibit.

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