

Being a Migrant

Cristian Pineda's Participatory Art

Pascale Naveau Pineda*

In recent years, migration and border crossings between Mexico and the United States have been a recurring motif for many artists. In their canvases, with their pens, or with their cameras, they have denounced the forced disappearances, murders, rapes, and other forms of ill treatment suffered by Central American and Mexican migrants in their pilgrimage to the United States, and the reasons that force them to abandon their countries, usually violence, insecurity, and the lack of opportunities. This article deals with an artistic dynamic developing around the issue of “being a migrant” in the projects by visual artist Cristian Pineda, who shows through his art that it is much more than being a victim, someone undocumented, an “illegal.”

For more than a decade, Cristian Pineda's art has been committed to the issue of migration. From our very first interviews as part of my research project about the reconstruction of the fabric of Mexican society based on artistic processes, it was very clear to me that Cristian did his work not only with skill, but with great conviction. As he said, “Art serves to navigate a little more, to humanize the hard data.”

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Photos courtesy of Cristian Pineda and the author.



▲ Wayfarers.





◀ Circle of Life 1.



▶ Circle of Life 2.

**“Art serves to navigate a little more,
to humanize the hard data.”**

Cristian Pineda

What role can art play in a situation of such violence that even governments are overwhelmed and people have to flee their countries to survive? That question is the starting point for my research around the work of this artist from Oaxaca.

The crosscutting themes guiding the painter’s artistic process coincide with the questions posed in my own research. That was how we decided to pool our knowledge to develop participatory art projects with migrants in transit through Mexico, but also with refugees from other countries (mainly Africa) in Belgium.

After almost 10 years of creating art with migratory themes in Mexico and other countries, Pineda’s vast experience and the diversity of his projects led him to expand his artistic horizon and experiment with new ways of making art in which the migrants themselves are the protagonists. It is not by chance that this self-taught visual artist directs his motivation at the question of migration. Cristian was born in Juchitán, a town in the state of Oaxaca on the Isthmus of Tehuantepec. This part of the country is an obligatory transit point for Central Americans who want to cross Mexico to the United States. So, from his childhood on, he met migrants, listened to their stories and dreamed about their countries, allowing him to establish relationships of empathy and understanding with them. From 2006 on, Pineda began to be committed to their cause through his work and, both individually and collec-

tively, joining with other artists, he has developed participatory art projects with migrants and refugees.

His first steps along this road can be found in the 2006 series *Wayfarers*. According to art and migration specialist and sociologist Víctor Espinosa,

A more important fact in the development of his own work was the creation of almost 300 sketches of human figures that he did while exploring the route of the migrants. . . . Creating these sketches served as a catharsis that helped him process the reality he saw during his journey. These drawings also became a graphic archive that recorded the inhuman, vulnerable conditions of the migrants in their passage through Mexico.¹

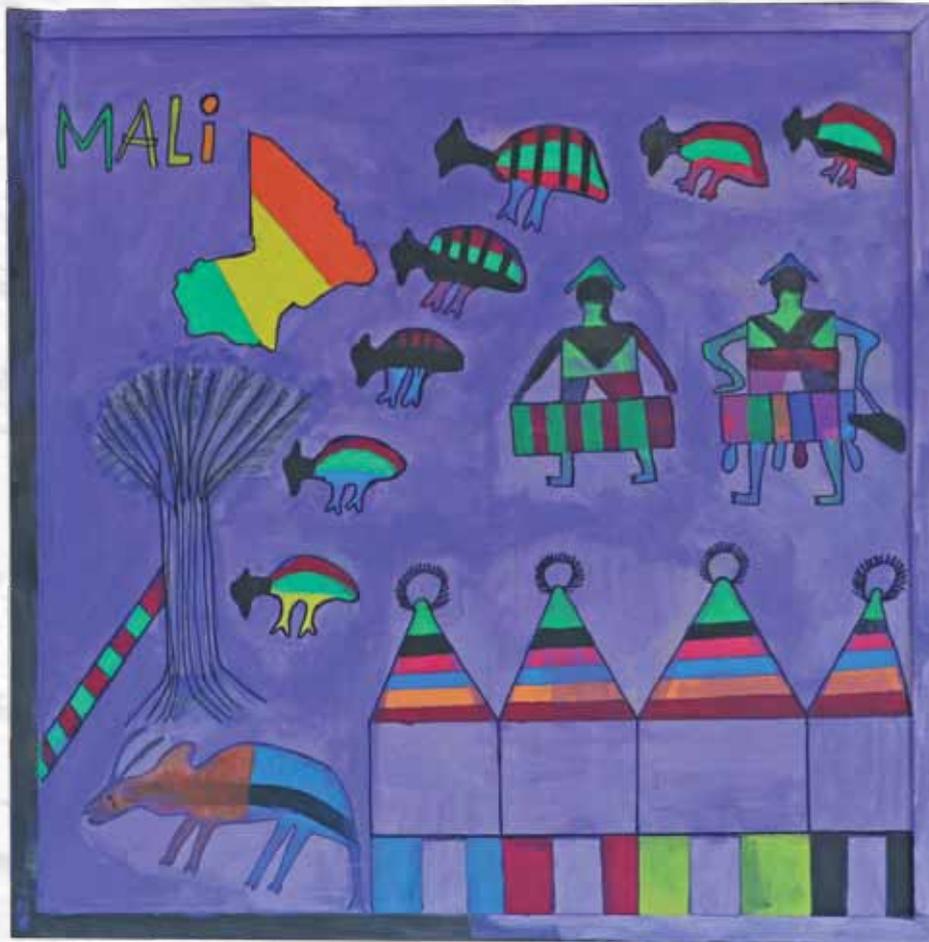
This project later led him to collaborate with the Chiquitracá Graffiti-artist Collective in the work *Where Are They!* about the enormous number of people who have disappeared



▲ *Circle of Life 3.*

in recent years in Mexico.² The work was shown publicly during a protest at the U.S. Embassy in Mexico City at the time of President Barack Obama's 2013 visit. Cristian Pineda's search for collective experimentation in his work, his forms of action or irruption onto the public space, and his enormous interest in the social expressions of the citizenry are what motivated him to participate in this collective project.

Based on this experience of interaction with the public space, Pineda set his sights on transcending the work *Where Are They!* and developing a participatory art project directly with migrants, which would be exhibited on the street in order to interact, in turn, directly with the



► Boxes of Life 2.

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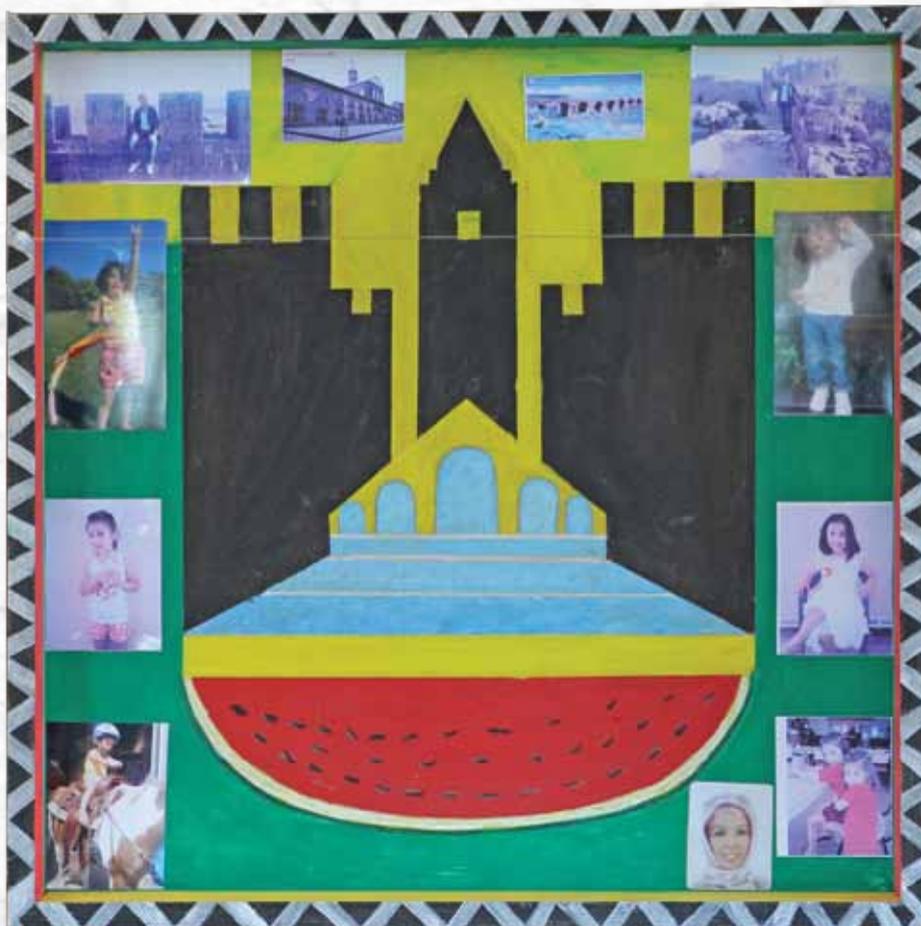
public. In addition, given the fact that in our society it is almost always the media that guides public opinion about what migrants supposedly are, Pineda decided to create these participatory projects to develop a genuine vision of what it means to be a migrant. This concept became one of his most important works, *Being a Migrant*. By putting the accent on the subjectivity and experience of the participants themselves, this project/work shows the process that allows migrants to go from being victims to being actors, spokespersons for a political and social critique.

This is how Cristian Pineda began a new adventure: participatory art with communities fleeing from the violence in their countries of origin. His first experience began in 2013 with *Paper Wayfarers*. He distributed paper, paints, and pens to migrants so they could draw and write about their condition as migrants. Pineda did not set out to create works that would respect conventional artistic norms and aesthetics with this project, since what he was really interested in was getting down the human process whereby the migrants narrated their individual stories. *Paper Wayfarers* consists of 50 sketches selected from the 300 drawings of his *Wayfarers*, reworked by the migrants themselves, evoking a multicultural human exodus.³ Due to the multitude of sketches and the symbolic charge of the violence they illustrate, *Paper Wayfarers* translates more than anything else the exodus between Central America and the United

States. This project offers a space for the collective participation of migrants together with the artist to construct a work that serves to contain the experiences, narrations, and denunciations about their journey through Mexico. By giving these apparently invisible and undocumented migrants a name, an age, and a nationality, the project gives them a presence.

In that same year, Pineda began a second participatory art project, *Boxes of Life*, with refugees in Belgium. These are wooden boxes that participants use to deposit their experiences and construct the work. In Belgium, he worked with asylum seekers at a Red Cross center where they await a government response about their remaining in the country. Pineda interacted there with people from very diverse cultures and nationalities: Africans, Afghanis, Kurds, and Nepalese, among others. He was very surprised by their sketching and painting techniques, but also by the stories and the wealth of their cultures of origin. This was a very enriching geographical and cultural journey for Cristian and artistically allowed him to experience and observe new horizons. By making his project a participatory art process, he gained a new experience, which favors “meeting a new world.”⁴

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▲ *Boxes of Life 1.*

The work takes this simple idea as a starting point: the object stops being just a thing and turns into an instrument of historic identity, emphasizing how the violence conditions *Being a Migrant*.

Boxes of Life 3. ▶



Parallel to these two participatory art projects, Pineda traveled to the Mexico-U.S. border to see the Arizona desert; he created a work of art based on this experience, *Circles of Life*. His idea here is to symbolize isolated violence using objects abandoned by the migrants in the desert. These objects arranged in a circle are Pineda's installation. This *objet d'art* transmits the idea that no one is protected against violence and that it reaches us all. The work takes this simple idea as a starting point: the object stops being just a thing and turns into an instrument of historic identity, emphasizing how the violence conditions *Being a Migrant*. This sum of apparently isolated facts outlines the generalized violence in our societies; it begins by attacking those most vulnerable, but then expands in a never-ending spiral.

In 2014, Pineda went through a personal experience that made him leave his country and live temporarily in Belgium. During his stay, he produced the series "Foreignisms," in which he experienced *Being a Migrant* from another perspective: his own.

The work is a series of pieces that express my experience when I felt like a foreigner, overwhelmed, far from my visual, cultural, and emotional reference points. This work is the result of a moment of change, of transformation, of a search for myself in another reality, another context, other coordinates, other environmental frequencies, other economic, socio-cultural, commercial stimuli.⁵

The pieces in this series make reference to the emotions, the feelings of the moment, nature, the landscape, and the very marked linguistic and cultural frontiers in this country, but also to his own limitations, whether due to the language or for more cultural and emotional reasons. With "Foreignisms," Pineda not only traveled to another country, but also experienced and journeyed in the shoes of *Being a Migrant*.

On his return to Mexico, Cristian once again took up the topic of migration in Juchitán, the place where it all started. "Migroma" is a large-scale project made up of a series of 30 wooden statues. Faithful to his characters in the 300 *Wayfarers* sketches, the figures in these statues are the same: full-sized human silhouettes that, because of their form and dimensions, have

a very imposing symbolic impact. This work is a public art project, and the statues will be exhibited in the country's streets, central plazas, and parks.

Ten years of trips, discoveries, encounters, narratives, emotions, lessons, experiences, tears, smiles, and much more. At 35, Cristian Pineda has worked ceaselessly on the issue of migration. Because you cannot rest in the face of the sad reality of migration around the globe. He continues traveling the world over and over tirelessly. His trips are accompanied by many reflections about violence, borders, hope, being human, space and territory, and he transmits them to us through his work. Nicolas Bourriaud defines interpersonal art as the art that "has as its theoretical horizon the sphere of human interactions and their social context more than the affirmation of a symbolic, autonomous, private space."⁶ Pineda's art is situated in this desire to interact with his social surroundings and day-to-day experiences. For Bourriaud, interpersonal art "encompasses all the practices that place the aesthetic relationship at the heart of the artistic process and that deal with the issues of connection, encounters, and collaboration."⁷

Traveling, always traveling. Traveling to other countries, to other borders, to other cultures; traveling toward new artistic experiences. Transcending his knowledge and practices, with his guiding principle: a search for something "beyond." Going beyond borders and going beyond denunciation. That is the reality —and the dream— of Cristian Pineda. **MM**



◀ Paper Wayfarer 1.

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NOTES

- ¹ Víctor Espinosa, *Santuarios* (Mexico City: private collector, 2015), p. 30.
- ² Chiquitracá is a collective of Juchitán-based graffiti artists that paints the faces of elders on the facades of traditional houses.
- ³ For several years, Pineda has been visiting migrant shelters in different parts of Mexico where he shares their conditions. The migrants express their experiences through artistic activities.
- ⁴ Catherine Duchesneau, "De la participation en art. L'Écomusée du fier monde comme alliance entre l'art et la participation citoyenne", *Art participatif et démocratie/Participative Art and Democracy* (Louvain-la-Neuve, Belgium: Presses Universitaires de Louvain, 2011).
- ⁵ Interview by the author with Cristian Pineda in 2015.
- ⁶ Nicolas Bourriaud, *Ésthétique relationnelle* (Dijon, France: Presses du réel, 2011).
- ⁷ *Ibid.*

Suggested links:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WNuNG9fCj8> (*Paper Wayfarers*).

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JfKJhg-2so> (*Boxes of Life*).