

## Under the Same Sky ... We Resist: Erika Harrsch's Comfort of Urgency.

By KAREN MOE July, 2018



*Erika Harrsch, The Dream Book, Digital Photographs, 2017*

Right after Mexican artist, Erika Harrsch, first exhibited her project “Under the Same Sky... We Dream” from August to September 2017 at El Paso’s Ruben Centre for Visual Arts, things got a lot worse for those seeking asylum and a better life in the US—the overt brutality of the Trump Administration’s “Zero Tolerance Act” began to flex its muscles just the next month. On June 11th, 2018, Vox News reported how between October 1, 2017 and May 31, 2018, at least 2,700 children have been split from their parents. 1,995 of them were separated over the last six weeks of that window—April 18 to May 31—indicating that at present, an average of 45 children are being taken from their parents each day. Just as the escalation began to increase, “Under the Same Sky... We Dream” was shown at the BRIC Arts Media House, Brooklyn, NY from April-May 2018. The multi-media installation specifically references the DREAM Act immigration reform legislation that was never adopted. The act

would have given illegal immigrants who came to the US as children full citizenship as opposed to a life in limbo or the token temporary status offered by DACA.



*Erika Harrsch, Under the Same Sky... We Dream, Installation, BRIC House Artist Studio, Brooklyn, New York, photo credit Erika Harrsch*

However, under the current administration, for those not having had the good fortune of being born in the first world, and for those who made it there so young that they have known no other, even the possibility to dream is being taken away. And, for those who are currently separated from their families and locked up in a cage, any dream that they or their parents once had has become a living nightmare. Paradoxically, despite the brutality of the subject matter, “Under the Same Sky... We Dream” offers a space for tranquility and reflection.

The installation is held in a dimly lit room, a large format video projection of the sky provides an ethereal ambience, Magos Herrera’s smoky voice soothes in surround sound, there is a beautiful book of photography and exquisitely formatted text to look at and visitors are offered a mattress to recline on and a blanket. Indeed, if one doesn’t know what the event is about, if they have wandered in off of the street or not read the project descriptor, they may even come in to take a nap. However, this proffering of tranquility is part of the act. Any lulling is intended to wake us up.



*Erika Harrsch, Under the Same Sky... We Dream, Installation, BRIC House Artist Studio, Brooklyn, New York, photo credit Erika Harrsch*

It is most likely the physical discomfort that we would notice first. The blankets are made of Mylar and are thin, stiff, foreign and crinkly; the mattresses have the un-nurturing severity of military mattresses because that is precisely what they are. These are the same blankets and mattresses that are used by Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) in the detention centers for illegal minors caught crossing the border. These youth who risk their lives for a better one are technically referred to as ‘illegal aliens.’ The irony of the blanket choice does not go unnoticed: Mylar blankets are also known as ‘space blankets’ and were originally developed by NASA to be used in Outer Space, a mythical place of beyond human and not of earth.

The incarcerated migrant children, along with the visitors to “Under the Same Sky... We Dream,” are comforted by the dehumanizing metaphor. And there is something about the song. Even without the looping, even if we only listened to the 12 minutes and 59 seconds of its literal length, what is at first experienced as beauty is soon undermined by the horror it contains. However, this is not the overt horror of the borderland detention camps; rather, like the timbre of Herrera’s voice that swoons us first-off into a space of softness, this is the underlying horror of the Dreamer’s everyday as they live the contradiction of an ostensibly comfortable existence in the bosom of the American Dream in a state of uncertainty and the gnawing threat of being forced to return to a homeland that they have often never known.

Herrera is singing the DREAM Act, word for word. Like any governmental legislation, it baffles with its doldrums of legalese and its adherence to the laborious mandate for keeping any possibility of misinterpretation at bay. The artist ad-libs, does her best with such soulless lyrics, riffs regularly on a chorus of 'Alien,' but, depending upon your tolerance for drudgery, the song eventually starts to get under your skin. And, to top it all off, we are surrounded by a hypnotic albeit vertigo inciting sky.

There is nothing peaceful about this sky. Harrsch compressed more than thirty thousand still photographs of the sky between El Paso and Juarez that were taken from sunrise to sunset in order to create it. Along with the political commentary on the unfulfilled DREAM Act, "Under the Same Sky... We Dream" also reflects upon the right to move freely across borders. The sky, able to span all, is a utopia of unfettered space. However, Harrsch's sky is literally marred by the Mexico/ US border that cuts across the base of the projection screen, creating both an uncannily recognizable horizon along with a slash through the sky's unbreakable essence. Her sky is informed by what it transcends. The artist has sped up the footage, creating an unnatural and frenetic pacing where white, then grey, then black clouds swirl together as a tumultuous soup and our hearts start to race and heads spin like those who are risking their lives to illegally cross the border beneath it.



*Erika Harrsch, Under the Same Sky... We Dream, Installation, Rubin Center for the Visual Arts UTEP, El Paso, TX, Installation, photo credit Erika Harrsch, 2017*

The book that we can peruse as we recline on the inhospitable mattresses beneath a deceptively hostile sky is called “The Dream Book.” Using photographs of the border and the text of the DREAM Act, Harrsch’s book charts the process of attempting to obtain ‘The American Dream.’ However, like the ineffable nature of such a dream, especially in the current political climate, the story of the dream in Harrsch’s book is thwarted every step of the way. The photographs compose a psychic topography as a collection of Chihuahua and Texas landscapes, border crossings backed up with cars, migrant youth laying in detention camps under the same alien blankets we have wrapped ourselves in, an aerial shot of the borderlands inscribed by its imaginary line in red, a child gazing through a chain linked fence. Like the unfulfilled DREAM Act that attempted conditional permanent resident status before the current Republican Administration, Harrsch’s Dream Book is thousands of miles away from a happy ending.



*Erika Harrsch, Anapra Border Crossing, El Paso Texas, Digital Photograph from The Dream Book, 2017*

Erika Harrsch’s “Under the Same Sky...We Dream” has been created during a time in American history when not only a dream has been revoked, but any possibility of its return seems to be an existential antithesis. Despite the Republican Administration’s recent amendment to their policy of separating migrant children from their parents, no system is yet in place to re-unite the incarcerated children with their families.[i] As Bob Carey, the former director of the Office of Refugee Resettlement, stated “this is child abuse being perpetrated by the American government.”[ii] By creating a space where hope is horror and the sky is no longer itself, Harrsch paradoxically comforts us with the urgency of solidarity. In 2018 America, as the xenophobia under the Trump Administration escalates to a level of psychological and emotional genocide, “Under the Same Sky...We Dream” is a birthing place for resistance.