

## Guillermo Bert: The Journey

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### **Main Text—black vinyl**

Guillermo Bert makes artworks that explore the merging and converging of cultures, identity, and the endurance of immigrants who have left their home countries behind. Rooted in his personal story, Bert's primary focus has been the experiences of people and families who enter the United States along the U.S. – Mexico border. His artworks draw metaphorical relationships between the journeys of migrants, harsh and inhospitable desert landscapes, and the commodification and objectification of American values. This mid-career survey includes artworks in a variety of traditional and contemporary media that are drawn from the entirety of Bert's career, as well as new works produced exclusively for this exhibition.

In his multi-media and conceptually layered works, Bert addresses the ways in which colonization and capitalist systems contribute to cultural displacement and the loss of Indigenous identities, traditions, and religions. In series such as *Encoded Textiles* and *Border Zone*, Bert keeps cultural traditions alive through modern technology, enticing the viewer to actively participate in his art while simultaneously transporting them into the realities of others. Frequently, his work gives voice to people who have been marginalized, silenced, and overlooked.

*Guillermo Bert | The Journey* offers a comprehensive overview of Bert's artistic career to date, featuring iconic pieces from both public and private collections. As you embark on your own journey through this exhibition, we invite you to think about your personal experiences with immigration, question your own biases, and consider how your individual, family, and cultural traditions have been altered as result of immigration and colonization.

*This exhibition is guest-curated by Vivian Zavataro. We are grateful for the scholarly contributions of Tressa Berman, anthropoeta, writer, and curator; Ximena Keogh Serrano, poet and interdisciplinary scholar; and Alma Ruiz, independent curator.*

A companion exhibition, *Guillermo Bert: Groundwork*, is on view at The John and Geraldine Lilley Museum of Art at the University of Nevada, Reno, from September 5, 2023 to January 27, 2024.

#### About the Artist

Guillermo Bert is a multimedia artist based in Los Angeles. He was born in 1959, raised in Santiago, Chile, and left his home country in the early 1980s before immigrating to Los Angeles in 1981 seeking a more open and inclusive society. Bert worked as an Art Director at the *Los Angeles Times* and taught at the Art Center College of Design in Pasadena, California, before dedicating his time exclusively to his own art and design. His artworks are in the permanent collections of the Smithsonian American Art Museum, Los Angeles County Museum of Art, the Rhode Island School of Design Museum, the Museum of Latin American Art, and the Nevada Museum of Art.

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*Guillermo Bert: The Journey is available for purchase in the Shop.*

## Encoded Textiles

In the series *Encoded Textiles*, Guillermo Bert keeps cultural traditions alive using modern technology to give voice to people who have been marginalized, silenced, and overlooked. At the heart of this series lies the creative process of encoding: the act of incorporating messages into the fabric of the artworks themselves, and in the technological sense, of converting symbols into a digital language. QR codes (quick-response codes) are two-dimensional bar codes that carry messages and information. Using a smartphone, viewers can uncover stories and poems related to the tapestries on view. The interactive aspect of these artworks provides a window into South and Central American Indigenous stories.

The videos that accompany the QR codes (which can be viewed on your personal mobile device or in the Wayne Prim Theater on the first floor) feature oral histories, music, stories, and poems about Indigenous peoples with an aim towards preserving their identities, traditions, and religions. By prominently featuring these narratives in a museum setting, Bert confronts historical patterns of misrepresentation and cultural stereotyping that often occurs within cultural institutions, while also acknowledging how colonization and exploitation have contributed to cultural displacement and erasure.

## Sound Bites

The *Sound Bites* series came about following the aftermath of the 2016 United States presidential election. Based on “sound bites” Bert heard and observed on radio and television, these artworks reveal the artist’s witty and politically-engaged mind. He strategically utilizes vibrant neon signs and replica gold bars to convey brief and pointed phrases that question prevailing narratives disseminated by the mainstream media.

Beyond their aesthetic appeal, each artwork is intended to confront and challenge the viewer, prompting contemplation and demanding consideration. For instance, in the neon sculpture, *You don't have the right* (2017), the artist paraphrases the U.S. Miranda warning—the legal reminder of one's rights during an arrest—to encourage viewers to assert their voices in the midst of our current polarized, political climate. Furthermore, the use of gold bars holds a deeper symbolism: highlighting the role that money plays in politics and suggesting that it has eroded longstanding values that once defined American democracy.

## Barcodes

Guillermo Bert's *Barcodes* challenge viewers to examine their relationship with consumption, while at the same time shedding light on the connection between American values and consumer culture. Originally designed to streamline transactions and track inventory, the Universal Product Code, or UPC barcode, is transformed by Bert into a metaphor for the commodification of human existence in the contemporary world.

Inspired by their iconic and ubiquitous presence in everyday life, Bert turns barcodes into art objects in their own right. He coats each barcode with either twenty-four carat gold leaf or a lustrous varnish—the same finish used on luxury cars. Yet, beneath their ostentatious surfaces a troublesome message emerges. Bert's gilded and glossy barcodes also serve as a mirror, compelling viewers to question their own urge to participate in capitalist society through the pursuit of material possessions.

## Exodus

The works in the *Exodus* series honor the endurance of immigrants who have left their home countries behind, focusing primarily on the experiences of people and families who enter the United States along the U.S. – Mexico border. These pieces address the complexities of migration, cultural displacement, and political borders.

In this series, Bert compassionately observes the human condition, specifically addressing the hardships endured by immigrants uprooted from their homelands due to conflict, political unrest, or economic hardship. Artworks such as *La Bestia* (2017)—with a story that can be accessed by scanning the QR code with your personal mobile device—invite the viewers to empathize with people and families caught in the upheaval of forced migration, fostering a deeper understanding of their stories and struggles.

Bert's works encourage viewers to reflect on their own personal privilege and to question social structures, while challenging the prejudices that hinder our collective progress. Through his art, Bert sparks dialogue about what moral responsibility individuals, communities, and nations bear towards people seeking refuge—while stressing the urgent need for empathy and compassion.

## The Warriors

Newly created for this exhibition, *The Warriors* are life-sized, laser-cut, wooden sculptures set in an environment that resembles a harsh desert landscape. Inspired by the 2,200-year-old Chinese *Terracotta Warriors*—8,000 life-sized soldier statues excavated in Shaanxi province in 1974—Bert’s vision was to honor the warriors of our time by creating an army of immigrant heroes.

The relationship between the individual and the collective group is apparent in the installation. Seen individually, the modern-day warriors are strong and proud, but when viewed together—and multiplied in the surrounding mirrors—they become an overwhelming and forceful army. All the individuals depicted represent real people with real names—David, Alex, Margarita, Nalleli, Eduardo, Sabrina, and others—who stood at the forefront during and after the COVID-19 pandemic. Bert encourages us to think about the invisibility of Latinx workers, including nurses, farmers, firefighters, activists, who kept the American economy thriving when most of the world stayed home. A visual tribute to strength and dedication, *The Warriors* pay homage to these fighters, acknowledging their courage, resilience, and warrior spirit.

## Tumble Dreams

*Tumble Dreams* is an immersive projection mapping installation that highlights untold stories of undocumented Latinx immigrants, their quest for a better life, and the realities they face when crossing the U.S. – Mexico border. Bert fuses art with ideas about migration, using the tumbleweed as a symbol of the American West, to create this immersive experience. By projecting the images of immigrants onto the tumbleweeds, Bert compares their journeys to the unpredictable, haphazard movement of these resilient desert plants. Much like the tumbleweeds that blow across the open desert with the guidance of the wind, these individuals endure an arduous and unpredictable path, adapting to the ever-changing and harsh circumstances they encounter during their migration.

The installation is a window into a unique dream-like realm, in which tumbleweeds float in a dark space that engulfs the viewer with voices and moving imagery, metaphorically representing the dreams, hopes, and fears of those searching for a brighter future.

Guillermo Bert adopts varied forms of material and digital technologies to activate what we might call a “living circuit” of memory—one that bridges spaces, places, and time. This is a moving art, one that is capable of transfixing us beyond the physical space wherein we come to its view.

Ximena Keogh Serrano, poet and  
interdisciplinary scholar

By using these icons to represent the price of democracy or the price of justice, I transformed these concepts themselves into commodities. The *Barcodes* series blurs the boundaries between cultural and capitalistic values. I wanted the viewer to ponder the meaning of moral values and commodities, to ask whether art is an element of culture or a materialist aspect of our society.

Guillermo Bert

There is an eerie semblance between the experience of migration and its ever-resounding echoes. As imparted by the Migrant’s Prayer:

*Partir es morir un poco./ Llegar nunca es llegar.*

“To leave is to die a little/ To arrive is never to arrive.”

The use of tumbleweeds in this visual project is symbolic. Tumbleweeds, we might say, belong to the wind. Known as a plant that scatters its seeds as it rolls across currents of air, tumbleweeds can grow roots anywhere. This singular characteristic speaks to the experienced reality of countless beings who form part of the hyper-fluid migration circuits that have come to characterize the world at large.

Ximena Keogh Serrano, poet and  
interdisciplinary scholar



In ancient times, people migrated from one continent to another, populated it, and from there, groups left for other directions. Considering that migration is the basis of human life and not a recent phenomenon, as many believe, Bert collected a series of immigrant stories that exposed the grueling journey Mexican and Central American citizens undertake in search of the American Dream. He called them *Tumble Dreams* because, like tumbleweeds, people keep moving, driven by unavoidable circumstances, until they come to rest in places where their invisibility provides protection.

Alma Ruiz, independent curator

In case the subtle messaging of algorithmic codes [in Bert's *Encoded Textile* series] evades us, the direct glare of neon statements serves it up with a punch: 'There is no filter for toxic culture'. 'You don't have the right to remain silent'. The series itself can be stitched together as a sequencing of cause and effect between the "invisible hand" of capitalism and the "hired hand" of the toiling migrant laborer.

Tressa Berman, *anthropoeta*,  
writer, and curator

Guillermo Bert plays with the idea of borders by framing the experience of Central and Latin American migrants from a kaleidoscopic view. The visual code-switching through lighted panels suggests surveillance under the watchful eye of border patrols, as well as the fluctuating and dizzying effects of the migrant experience.

Tressa Berman, *anthropoeta*,  
writer, and curator

In this gathering of souls, the figures are not anonymous: they are embodied archetypes with names, occupational slots, struggles, and dreams. In short, they are fully human.

Tressa Berman, *anthropoeta*,  
writer, and curator

For Bert, [the historical discovery of the Chinese *Terracotta Warriors*] revealed something that was there all along, but invisible to everyone. To re-evaluate this event within a contemporary context (and on a much smaller scale), Bert conceived of a modern force, an army of frontline workers who would soldier on regardless of the circumstances.

Alma Ruiz, independent  
curator