

Commentary: Why I paint portraits of adults and children who have died in the custody of U.S. Customs and Border Protection



Antonia Davis and a group of activists hold portraits she painted, of people who died in ICE custody during a protest in front of the federal building downtown. (Credit: Bob Davis)

BY ANTONIA DAVIS

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Painting portraits memorializing adults and children who have died in the custody of U.S. Customs and Border Protection (CBP) or Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) has been a heart-rending endeavor. When I heard that a Border Patrol agent had shot a young woman in the head in Rio Bravo, Texas, in May 2018, I was sickened. As an artist I knew it was my job to do all that I could to draw attention to this tragedy so that her death would not soon be forgotten.

After painting the portrait of Claudia Patricia Gómez González, I read about the deaths of two young children in CBP custody: Jakelin Caal Maquín and Felipe Gómez Alonzo. I wanted to paint them as I had painted Claudia, from the photos that their families will have to remember them by. I planned to crown their young heads with golden halos and gather at their feet gardens of flowers that they will never walk through.

I began painting their portraits, but I stopped my work because I was asked to temporarily house an asylum-seeking mother and her two young children who had just been released from detention. I hurried to my studio and carefully covered the portraits to protect my young guests from further trauma. The children were the same age as the deceased children. This young family was fleeing political persecution. The mother had stood up to the authorities who had overthrown the previous democratically elected government and was told that if she came back, she would be killed.



Protesters carry portraits memorializing people who died in ICE custody. (Credit: Bob Davis)

Soon there were many more portraits to paint — two tiny children, 19-month-old Mariee Juárez and 21/2- year-old Wilmer Josué Ramírez Vásquez, as well as Darlyn Cristabel Cordova-Valle, 10, and Juan de León Gutiérrez and Carlos Gregorio Hernández Vásquez, both 16. It was important to me to paint them as saints or angels surrounded by beauty, each of them with their own story, their families, their hopes and their dreams.

During the time I was painting the portraits, young people from all over the country came to San Diego to help distribute donated supplies after they heard about the caravans of people coming to the U.S.- Mexico border. They were people following their hearts, striving to do whatever they could to help alleviate the suffering of their brothers and sisters from other countries. Some of them planned to camp out, but due to rainy weather they ended up staying in our home as guests. Some nights we had as many as 20 people in sleeping bags throughout our home. Among these young people were “Dreamers” who came to the U.S. as children themselves and who have lived a life in limbo because the future of the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) program was uncertain until a federal judge’s recent ruling restoring it. They suggested using this Zapatista phrase on the portraits: “They tried to bury us, but they didn’t know we were seeds.”

Friends and strangers have carried the portraits in many demonstrations and vigils on the streets of San Diego, at the border, in front of CBP and ICE offices and at the annual Women's March. As the number of portraits grew, I was concerned that I wouldn't be able to find enough people to help carry and display them. My concerns have been unfounded as strangers have always been willing to carry them, and have even thanked me for the honor.



Protesters march against injustices at the U.S. Mexico border holding portraits by Antonia Davis, memorializing those who died in ICE custody. (Credit: Bob Davis)

People have arrived at our borders for decades seeking protection from state-sponsored violence and terror, and for decades we have opened our doors to help those in need. Like my in-laws who came to the U.S. (some without immigration documents) from Poland and Czechoslovakia in the 1930s, many now come seeking freedom from persecution due to their race, religion, nationality, political opinion or sexual orientation.

In contrast to the hateful speech demonizing desperate people seeking asylum in this country, I wanted to portray them as the beautiful, hopeful people they were. Each and every one is deserving of our compassion and respect.

Many have hope that with a new administration, conditions at the border will improve. I have my doubts. The predatory immigration enforcement laws of the Clinton administration set the stage for the Obama-Biden administration where more than 3 million people were "removed" from the United States. That number does not include those who "self-deported" or those who were turned away at the border by the CBP.

My hope is that people who see these portraits will be inspired to take action in their names.

Davis is an artist and activist, and lives in San Diego.