

# HYPERALLERGIC

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## ARTICLES

### In Tijuana, an Artist-Designed Treehouse Gives a Peek into the US

The Japanese artist collective Chim↑Pom has built a treehouse dubbed “USA Visitor Center” that looks across the US–Mexico border.

Claire Voon | February 2, 2017



View of USA Visitor Center built in the backyard of a family's house along the border in Colonia Libertad, Tijuana (photo by Osamu Matsuda, all images courtesy Chim↑Pom Studio and MUJIN-TO Production, Tokyo)

There's a treehouse in Tijuana perched right by the border wall that separates the Mexican city from San Diego, California. A dozen or so local children play in it and sometimes even sleep in it overnight. From its wooden landing, they can spy a structure over the corrugated metal border that's much, much less DIY: a US border outpost from which guards keeping watchful eye on unsanctioned human activity likely gaze back.



The rickety treehouse structure stands out in the surrounding landscape of Colonia Libertad, a neighborhood through which tens of thousands of Mexican migrants have been known to pass in their attempts to cross the border into the US. The

“The Grounds” (2017), a real hole dug along the Mexican border wall that metaphorically links to “Libertad” (2017), or liberty’s grave on the American side (photo by Yuki Maeda)

Japanese art collective [Chim↑Pom](#) installed it there last July, deeming it a “USA Visitor Center” as a “metaphor to the ‘unreachable USA.’” Rising high above the wall, it is ultimately a viewing platform, offering a rare sight: an unbroken view of US land. An American flag waving amid the leaves and branches likens it to an embassy, cementing its designated state of in-betweenness.

The tree grows in the backyard of a family the artists met while visiting Mexico; it’s a burst of unrestrained life towering over the rigid border and the family’s self-built house, now a haven of green anchored to the dusty patch of land. Built prior to the outcome of last year’s US presidential, the treehouse now exists in a time when borders are scrutinized more intensely than ever, when the status of refugees and immigrants — both undocumented and documented — are under greater threats. Those invisible borders around America are increasingly transforming into non-negotiable lines that give men in suits reason to play politics with people’s lives.

“National parks like the Grand Canyon have visitor centers to learn about places that you cannot enter,” Chim↑Pom told Hyperallergic. “In Tijuana there are many people who cannot enter the US. So for people like them and Ellie, this is a USA Visitor Center to think about what America is.”

A member of Chim↑Pom, Ellie cannot enter the country as officials have denied her ESTA application. In 2012, she was attempting to visit Hawaii with a Japanese TV crew, but one crew member ended up being blacklisted by US Customs and Border Protection, resulting in her consequent barring from future entry. That incident led to her focus on borders and restricted mobility, giving rise to projects such as [Don’t Follow the Wind](#), a group exhibition that Chim↑Pom installed inside the Fukushima exclusion zone in 2015, parts of which will be accessible only as Japan lifts its evacuation orders.

While itself welcoming, the Tijuana treehouse also makes very real the physical separation between countries: you can see the US from here, but you can see the miles of wall, too. And, for the moment, you can also see a white cross planted on the American side. With the help of children,



Interior of the USA Visitor Center

Chim↑Pom scaled the border wall to place the piece there as a symbolic grave to liberty — a gesture that also highlights how the wall is essentially a formality and a formal construction. “Libertad” is a tribute to all who lost their lives attempting to cross the border. A plastic circle lies at its base, representing a hole that metaphorically links it to another work, “The Grounds.” A literal hole dug on the Mexican side, “The Grounds” extends beneath US soil but does not cut through all the way. It is another place of in-betweenness and of uncertainty; it reminds of the airports where immigrants returning to the US were recently trapped under Trump’s ban, a space of restricted access.

The USA Visitor Center will remain in the tree indefinitely under the care of the children. “Libertad” and “The Grounds,” however, will likely not last as long. The former is on public property while the later may soon be filled up.

“Since it’s a center to view ‘Libertad’ and ‘The Grounds,’ it’s essentially like an art gallery, but once those two works are removed it won’t have that function,” Chim↑Pom said. “But you’ll still be able to look over the US, and if a new wall is built, you would be able to see the construction.”



View of the border wall with a glimpse of “Libertad” (2017)



Chim↑Pom work with local residents and children to install “Libertad” (2017)



Chim↑Pom work with local residents and children to install “Libertad” (2017)