

How avant-garde Japanese artists found inspiration in Tijuana



Members of the avant-garde artist collective, Chim Pom, pose for a photograph near the U.S. border wall in a tree house they call USA Visitor's Center in Tijuana's Colonia Libertad. (David Maung /)



By **Sandra Dibble**

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The U.S. border's double-fence is simply part of the scenery for residents of an impoverished section of Tijuana's Colonia Libertad. For the [Japanese artist collective Chim Pom](#), this landscape of unpaved roads and small shacks pressed up against the international boundary line poses profound questions.

Known for provocative themes and unusual settings, the six-member group has built a wood tree-house in Tijuana overlooking the [U.S.-Mexico border](#), and labeled it "USA Visitor Center," filling it with items that include a coyote skin, a shelf with American classics such as "Adventures of Huckleberry Finn" and an image of a \$5 bill with the face of Donald Trump.

On Thursday, before returning to Tokyo, the group installed a second piece: a plastic cross emblazoned with the word, "Libertad," and set on a trash-filled strip across the primary fence on U.S.

territory, near a hole on the Mexican side that represents a clandestine tunnel. “Libertad” symbolizes just the opposite: the burial of liberty.

“This area is very crazy area,” said Ryuta Ushiro, leader of Chim Pom, which celebrated its eleventh anniversary last year. “This is the most important area to think about freedom — and it’s completely not freedom.”

Both barrier and political symbol, the U.S.-Mexico border and its infrastructure over the years has been the subject of some unusual artistic expression.

In 1997, Tijuana artist Marcos Ramírez, known as Erre, built a 33-foot Trojan horse that was displayed amid the car lanes leading to the San Ysidro Port of Entry as part of the periodic InSITE exhibition.

In 2005, the border at Playas de Tijuana was the setting for a performance piece by the Venezuela artist Javer Téllez that culminated with a human cannonball propelled across the border fence at Playas de Tijuana.

Last February, a Palestinian artist, Khaled Jarrar, took a piece of the border fence between Tijuana and San Diego and used it to fashion a symbolic ladder set in Mexico across the border fence from Texas.

Chim Pom’s pieces are both artwork and progressive social commentary — and the location is part of their message. The group’s previous works include “[Don’t follow the Wind](#)”, set inside the radioactive exclusion zone of Japan’s 2011 Fukushima Daiichi Nuclear disaster. Another project, a performance piece, involved taking Louis Vuitton handbags to Cambodia and blowing them up using cleared land mines.

The artists focus on video, installations and performances, and for all the gravity of their subjects, they present themselves as merry, and at times mischievous. Though primarily known in Japan, they have been commanding international attention, with pieces exhibited in at London’s Saatchi Gallery and New York City’s Museum of Modern Art.

“Chim Pom wields irreverence like a weapon to shield what is, in fact, a deadly serious message,” according to [Artscape Japan](#), an English-language web magazine that focuses on the country’s art scene.

Chim Pom’s members first came to Tijuana last summer, and returned in December, spending a total of two months in the city. They said they have felt warmly received, loved the tacos and at Christmas dressed up as Santa Claus to deliver Japanese gifts to children in Colonia Libertad.

Their project has come as the U.S. president-elect has vowed to build a continuous wall on southern border and said Mexico will pay for it. Chim Pom’s members say their fascination with the border and

its contradictions had a different origin: An incident involving their only female member, Ellie, that ended with her being banned from entering the United States.

Ellie, who uses only her first name, was traveling to Hawaii with a Japanese television crew, one of whose members had previously jokingly identified himself as having had connections with a terrorist organization, the group said. As a result, they said that he and several others in the crew—including Ellie-- were barred from entering the United States.

Ellie's experience inspired a 2014 piece by the collective, COYOTE, which involved the use of video and Skype with a gallery in New York City, as she could not be there in person. The two Tijuana pieces, "USA Visitors Center" and "LIBERTAD" complete the series.

Set between the two border fences, "the cross is the proof of death of liberty in the area created by American government," Ushiro said.

Chim Pom's search for a setting at the border last year ended when members came upon a crude self-built house where Ester Arias Medina lives near a U.S. boundary marker with her grandchildren — up to nine at a time. "I've never seen such a fascinating house," Ushiro said. "They are using the border as their own wall."

The artists asked Arias if they could build a tree house in her pepper tree and she said yes. She felt sad about Ellie's inability to legally enter the United States, a condition shared by many residents of her Tijuana neighborhood. "More than anything we were moved by the girl's story," Arias said.

Known for its smuggling activity, residents of this area of Colonia Libertad are used to the sounds of footsteps at night — and that of saws cutting through the secondary border fence. But Arias says she focuses on her home and her family, on feeding the grandchildren that love the new tree house in the yard.

Chim Pom's members say the area prompts questions. The tree house looking down on the border wall asks, "What is America, what is the border?" the artists wrote in a proposal. They had planned to build a tunnel that emerged on the U.S. side, but the structure was scaled back to end underground at the border, the dirt embedded with Ellie's footprints, simulating an image of man's first steps on the moon.

For border residents, Chim Pom's piece is a reminder of the region's unique location, "the coexistence of two cultures, which generates diversity, contrasting ideas and energies," said Arturo Rodríguez, owner of Tijuana's La Caja Galeria.

In Japan, a country with no land borders, members of Chim Pom hope to confront audiences with a different reality with this latest piece.

"Most Japanese people don't know about the border problem between the United States and Mexico,"

Ushiro said, adding that “this is really an international problem.”

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