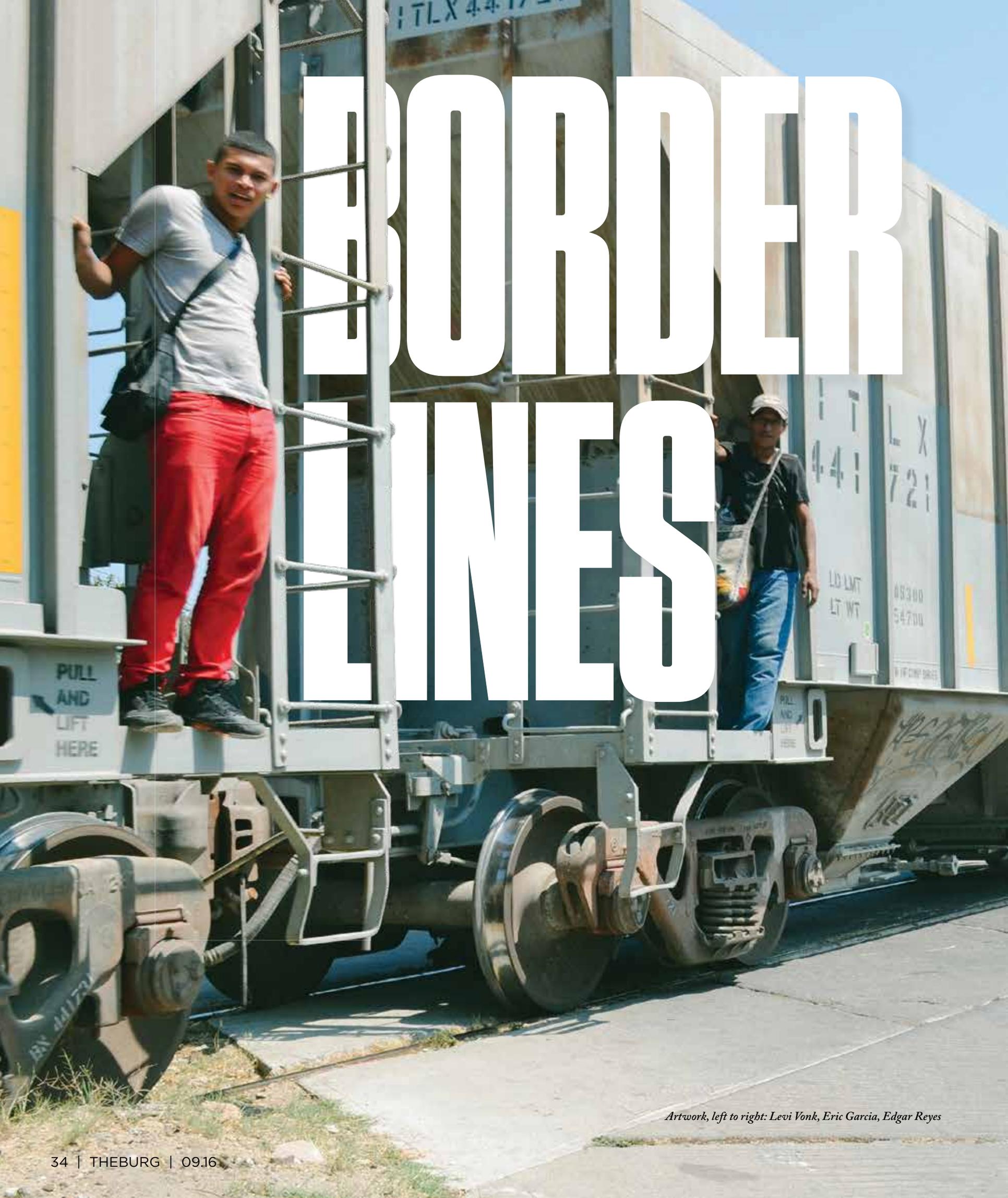


BORDER LINES



Artwork, left to right: Levi Vonk, Eric Garcia, Edgar Reyes

New exhibit gives voice to the hopes, terrors of the immigrant experience.

BY BARBARA TRAININ BLANK

Immigration isn't just a hot-button political issue. It's also a highly personal one.

An exhibit recently opened at the Susquehanna Art Museum—"Después de la Frontera/After the Border"—that underscores that point.

"[It] is a bilingual group exhibition that honors the stories of recent, unaccompanied immigrant youth, families and young adults who fled their homes in Central America," said Alice Anne Schwab, museum director.

The multifaceted exhibit provides the cultural and historical context of the countries involved, including the terrors that youth and families face, such as gang recruitment, extortion, drug cartels and persecution.

But it also focuses on the uncertainties that lie ahead. The dangerous journey through Mexico and across the U.S. border may increase the likelihood that young people will be subject to human trafficking, kidnapping, sexual assault and even death.

Should they make the journey safely, the migrants still face the challenges of integrating into a new environment.

Felicitously, the exhibition, visiting from Baltimore, coincides with National Hispanic Heritage Month, which runs from mid-September to mid-October. It also overlaps, of course, with the presidential election, which has highlighted the political side of immigration.

Many artists have contributed to the exhibit, noted Tanya Garcia, a multimedia artist and its curator. A photographer, she developed a video of stories taken from interviews with youth and families. Artists doing work in such fields as illustration, painting, cartooning and video also have contributed.

Creative Alliance, a non-profit, multi-cultural and multi-disciplinary arts center in Baltimore, was commissioned to put together the exhibit, which was a year in the making, said Garcia.

"Several human service organizations came together to talk about ways to portray immigrant youth artistically in order to develop a positive narrative that welcomes families to Baltimore," she said.

The exhibit, she added, attests to the "inner strength, resilience and resourcefulness" of these youth and families.

As the exhibit content evolved, Garcia did more research and met with them.

"I realized, to tell the story, I would need many artists to be involved in sharing their experience but also the collective experience of many," she said. "Some of the artwork is abstract, political, documentary or personal."

In the exhibit, many of the names of the immigrants are not revealed to respect their request for anonymity, she said. Others have chosen to give their names and show their faces to bring awareness to their story.

"As someone who is of the Puerto Rican diaspora, my experience with immigration is very different," Garcia said. "While the topic of immigration is a big issue in the Latino community, I must also acknowledge this specific experience of immigration from Central America is not my own. That's why it's so important to be inclusive of those range of voices."

The museum will offer special programming in conjunction with the exhibit, including a showing of "Sin Nombre" ("Without a Name"), a film that offers a perspective of two youth—a Honduran girl immigrating to the United States and a boy trying to escape his life in a gang. To be shown Sept. 23, it premiered at the 2009 Sundance Film Festival.

A panel discussion featuring various experts on immigration-related issues will take place on Oct. 15.

Many of the visitors to the exhibit, located in the museum's Lobby Gallery, may not know the details of this immigrant experience other than in a general way. Garcia and Schwab hope that the artwork will personalize it.

"We can't be there. We can't live their experience," said Schwab. "I myself seek to understand and hope this will do it."

An exhibit like "Después de la Frontera," she added, illustrates the conviction that "museums can't just hang pretty pictures. They need to do something more. We need to be of and for the community." **B**

"Después de la Frontera" runs through Dec. 4 at the Susquehanna Art Museum, 1401 N. 3rd St., Harrisburg. For more information, visit www.sqart.org.

