

INTRODUCTION

In response to the COVID-19 pandemic, the United States issued a series of stay-at-home orders. Eventually, those who “conduct a range of operations and services in industries that are essential to ensure the continuity of critical functions in the United States” (cdc.gov) were exempted from these orders and have since been known as essential workers. Agricultural workers had been given this status but still face horrible working and social conditions with no noteworthy change as of late. At the expense of their health, these workers ensure the success of the US agricultural business. *Essential* brings awareness to the jarring realities Latino/a/x workers who toil in agricultural fields throughout the United States. Through different mediums and life stories, the relationship between labor, injustice, family, and community is voiced in *Essential* by nine artists.

Wesaam Al-Badry's images capture the daily routines of working in agricultural fields and orchards. **Abiam Alvarez**'s ceramics re-create tools used to toil over agricultural fields, and rotten fruit and vegetables commonly left behind. **David Bacon**'s photography documents labor and migrating communities.

Hannah Baldrige's portraits give insight into the working environment and landscape and acknowledge the early and long hours that workers daily experience. **caleb duarte**'s *Burning Houses* video documents an ongoing project with migrant workers before, during, and after crossing from Mexico to the US. **Juan R. Fuentes** creates works of cultural activism in woodblock prints. **Ricardo Ruiz**'s poems reflect the immigrant struggle of affording a living. **Christie Tirado**'s series *America's Essential Workers* showcases the life of Mexican migrant farmworkers through woodblock prints. **Arleene Correa Valencia**'s portraits use her experience of living and working in Napa Valley to explore the relationship between cruel, back-breaking labor amidst one of the richest locations in the US. The exhibition also includes historic works from the collection of **San Francisco State University's Labor Archives and Resource Center**.

—Brianna Montserrat Miranda, Exhibition Curator

ESSENTIAL FARMWORKER ART AND HISTORY

The San Francisco State University Fine Arts Gallery and guest curator Brianna Miranda have assembled an exquisite exhibition appropriately entitled *Essential*. The artworks in the exhibition focus on farmworkers by representing their lives, struggles, labor, and everyday experiences as essential workers. These artworks serve as a stark reminder that farmworkers are absolutely necessary for providing the food we eat and sustaining a vibrant economy. The artists whose work is displayed in the exhibition were born in Mexico, Iraq, and the United States, and the eclectic collection of their artwork includes paintings, photography, ceramics, installations, linocuts, silk screen prints, poetry, textiles, sculptures, and mixed media.

In addition to displaying a treasure trove of artworks, the exhibition implicitly encourages a reexamination of the often-overlooked history of farmworkers in the United States and the role that farm laborers have played in building a robust food industry in this country. Stated briefly, a rapidly expanding US agricultural industry hungry for cheap labor actively lured hundreds of thousands of immigrants to the US to work on farms during the first half of the twentieth century. Workers of various ethnic and racial backgrounds were recruited, including Japanese, Filipinos, African Americans, and Arab Americans, but Mexicans made up the largest percentage of the workforce by far. This workforce, which was comprised of contracted workers, undocumented immigrants, legal residents, and US citizens, was central to the building of a transnational agricultural empire that was fully supported politically and economically by various industries, such as banking, energy, transportation, textile, and commerce, not to mention extensive backing from the state and news media.¹

Farmworkers, however, were not credited for their part in the building of this empire, nor have they prospered equitably from its economic and political gains. On the contrary, they were excluded, for example, from the provisions of the 1935 National Labor Relations Act, a law that was part of Franklin

D. Roosevelt's New Deal² and which gave US industrial workers (but not farmworkers) the right to form unions and bargain collectively with their employers. To this day, there is no federal law protecting the rights of farmworkers to organize unions. Consequently, state laws such as those prohibiting children from working in the fields or requiring growers to provide shade, rest periods, restrooms, and clean drinking water to farmworkers are oftentimes simply ignored by agribusiness and the state alike.

For the most part, farmwork today continues to be performed mainly by immigrants because most US citizens are not willing to work for the low wages and in the harsh conditions that currently exist in the fields. Despite the fact that farm labor is absolutely essential for sustaining the nation's food industry, farmworkers are oftentimes treated as second-class citizens, or worse, as nonsubjects. To describe the precarious situation of farmworkers, historian Mae Ngai explains that immigration policies and laws in the early decades of the twentieth century, prompted in large part by agribusiness, “helped create a Mexican migratory agricultural proletariat,” which over time became a “a racialized, transnational workforce.”³

As Ngai explains, farmworkers were both essential for their labor but excluded from access to basic American ideals because of their nationality and social class; they were physically visible but not socially recognized, needed but not wanted—a contradictory predicament that led to the formation of what Ngai calls an “impossible subject,” which she defines as a person who has been denied the right to exist and thus becomes “a problem that cannot be solved.”⁴ To some extent, the conception of immigrant farmworkers as “impossible subjects” came to apply in varying degrees not only to undocumented workers but to legal immigrants and US citizens working in the fields, as well. Tragically, migrant farmworkers and their children have historically been systematically forced to straddle a space between meeting the demands of the agricultural labor market on the one hand and succumbing to sociocultural nonacceptance on the other. Immigrant farmworkers have come to be seen by a considerable sector of society as essential for their labor but disposable once their work is done.

The conditions under which farmworkers have been forced to live and work have not, however, gone uncontested. Farmworkers and their supporters have a long history of fighting back for basic rights and dignity. Of the various farm labor movements in the United States during the past century, there is no doubt that the Cesar Chavez–led United Farm Workers union (UFW) has been the most significant. For example, in the six-year period from 1966 to 1972, the UFW signed over a hundred union contracts, increased wages by almost a third, established hiring halls in every major agricultural area in California, instituted a seniority system of hiring, began the first ever pension plan for retired farmworkers, provided comprehensive health benefits for workers and their families paid for by the growers, abolished unsafe working conditions in the fields such as the use of the short-handled hoe, eliminated the growers' use of dangerous pesticides such as DDT,⁵ and increased its membership from five hundred to fifty thousand.

While the political clout of the various farmworker organizations may have waned in recent years, the long-term cultural effects of their struggles have not. In particular, farmworker movements and the workers who have joined them have inspired the widespread production of art and literature (including the artworks in SFSU's *Essential* exhibition) representing the lived realities and aspirations of farmworkers. Moreover, the artwork helps us comprehend that farmworkers are essential not only because they put food on our tables but because their struggles constitute the essence of human rights, social equality, and justice.

—Marcial González, Professor Emeritus of English at UC Berkeley

¹Gilbert G. Gonzalez and Raul A. Fernandez, *A Century of Chicano History: Empire, Nations, and Migration* (New York: Routledge, 2003), 85–182.

²Devra Weber, *Dark Sweat, White Gold: California Farm Workers, Cotton, and the New Deal* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994), 162–179; and Cletus E. Daniel, *Bitter Harvest: A History of California Farmworkers, 1870–1941* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1981), 167–257.

³Mae M. Ngai, *Impossible Subjects: Illegal Aliens and the Making of Modern America* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2004), 128.

⁴Ngai, *Impossible Subjects*, 5.

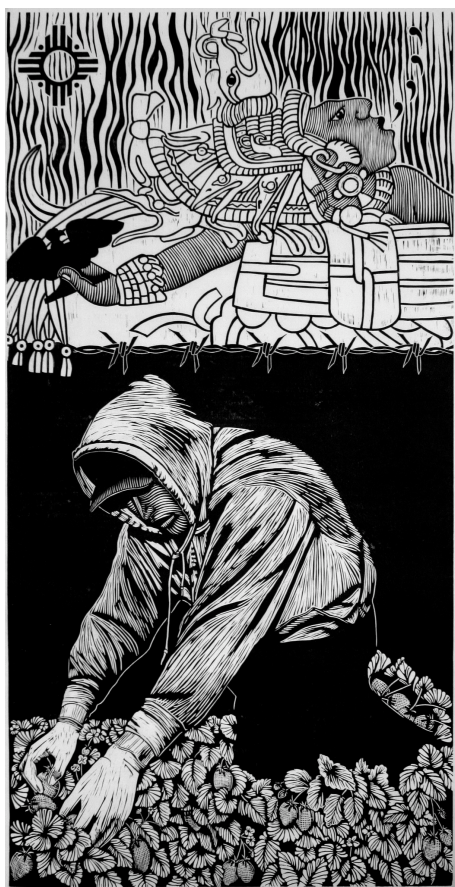
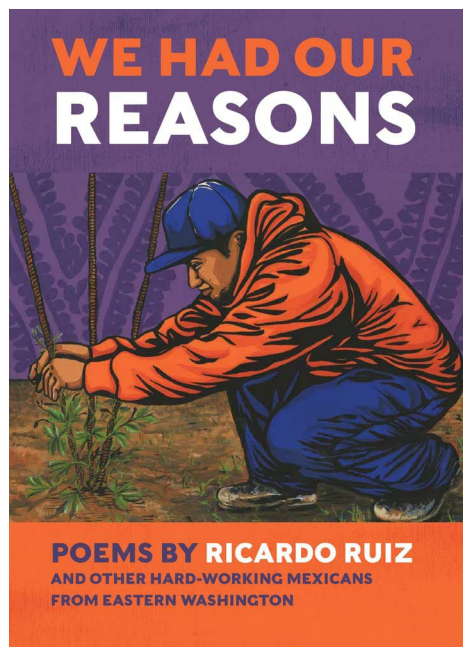
⁵Dichlorodiphenyltrichloroethane.

August 12 — September 2, 2023
Fine Arts Gallery
San Francisco State University
gallery.sfsu.edu

RIGHT
David Bacon
Untitled from the series *Two Years of Heat and COVID in the San Joaquin Valley* (2022)
Black and white photograph
16" x 20"



BELOW
Ricardo Ruiz
We Had Our Reasons (2022)
Published by Pulley Press



Juan R. Fuentes
Mayan Warrior (2011)
Woodcut
53" x 27"

RIGHT
Abiam Alvarez
Watermelon Bin (2021)
Ceramic
21" x 40" x 29"



BELOW
Wesaam Al-Badry
THE DREAM (2020)
Archival pigment print
20" x 16"



ABOVE
Arleene Correa Valencia
María Dolores from the series *Culpables Inocentes* (2018)
Acrylic on finished shipping pallet
42.13" x 40.95"
Courtesy of the artist and Catharine Clark Gallery

LEFT
Hannah Baldrige
Shining Light (2020)
Acrylic on canvas
36" x 48"



ABOVE
caleb duarte
Burning Houses (2021–23)
Looped video, documentation of sculptural performance
Funded by Creative Capital in 2019 as part of the *Walking the Beast* Project.



LEFT
Christie Tirado
Trabajadora Esencial (2020)
Linoleum print
18" x 13"

ARTISTS

Wesaam Al-Badry, Abiam Alvarez, David Bacon, Hannah Baldrige, caleb duarte, Juan R. Fuentes, Ricardo Ruiz, Christie Tirado, Arleene Correa Valencia
Works from the collection of SFSU's Labor Archives and Research Center

DESIGN

Brianna Montserrat Miranda

DESIGN

Madeline KO (madeline-ko.com)

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