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Gray Area's New Show TECHS-MECHS Celebrates Media Artist Rafael Lozano-Hemmer's Sprawling, Immersive Bodv of Work

Gray Area's new TECHS-MECHS exhibition, open until May 31, presents a thought-provoking retrospective of the work of Mexican-Canadian artist and technologist Rafael Lozano-Hemmer.

The Gray Area Foundation for the Arts, a nonprofit located in the heart of the Mission in the old Grand Theater, is hosting the spanning collection of installations. With a diverse, profound mix of Lozano-Hemmer's artwork, the exhibition ranges from playful participatory kinetic sculptures to political interrogations of surveillance technology.

"Airborne Newscasts" *(2013), a large shadow play using the tracked body-heat of visitors to evaporate international news stories arriving live. Image courtesy of Pace and bitforms gallery.*

San Francisco, of course, provides the perfect home for the show's themes of the power of technology and Mexican cultural history — with the backdrop of Silicon Valley and, in particular, the historically Latino neighborhood of the Mission (all wall panels and programs are in both English and Spanish, and the show is free for Mission residents). The artist, Lozano-Hemmer, is a Mexican-born scientist who, while studying chemistry in college in Montreal, soon became inspired by the creativity required in his research and turned to making immersive audio-visual artwork installations.

"Recurrent First Dream" (2022), generative animation made from the feminist, rationalist poem "Primero Sueño" written by the seventeenth-century Mexican writer Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz. Image courtesy of Gray Area and Joy Ding.

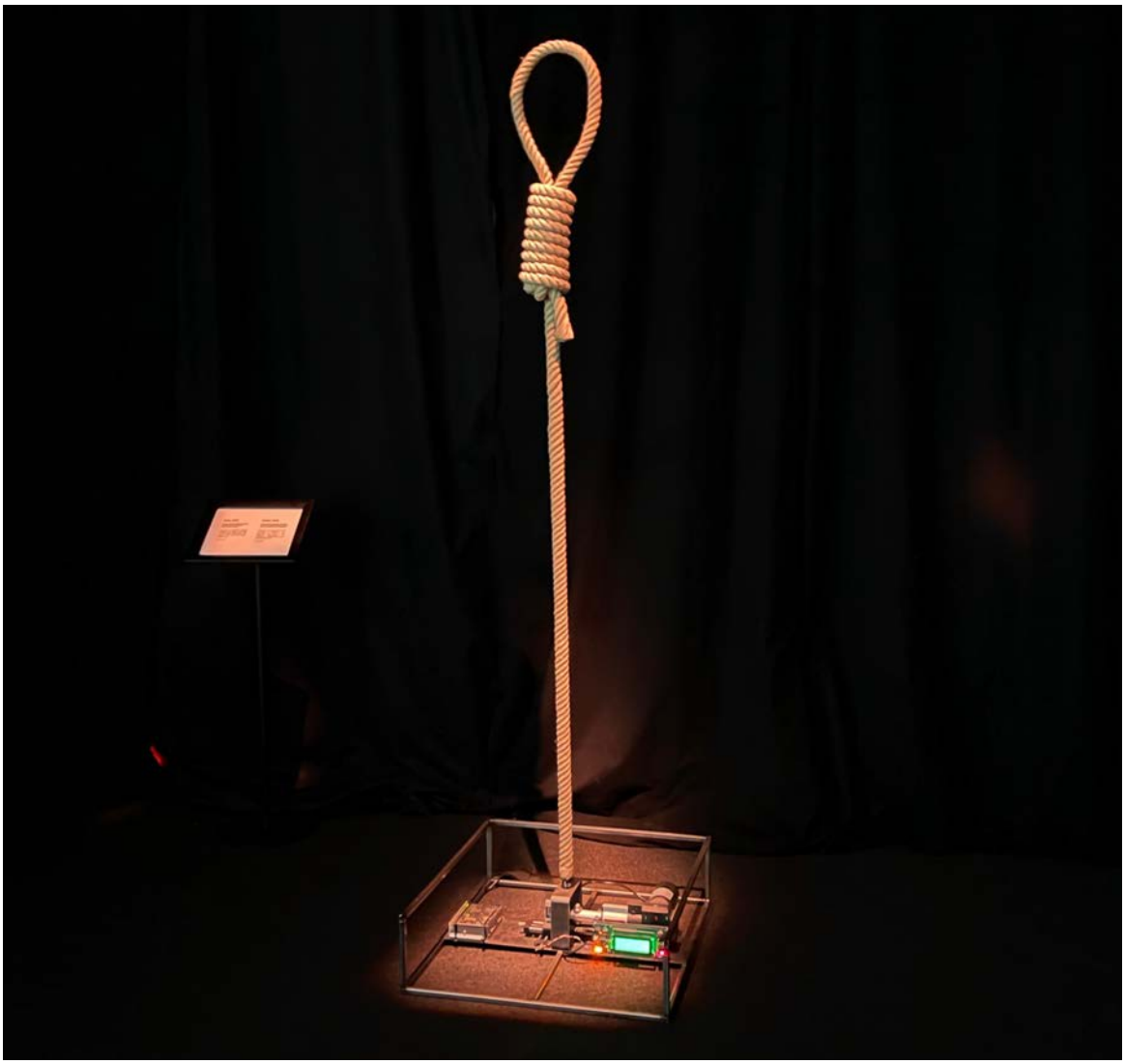
But don't expect the show to be like other San Francisco "immersive art experience" (à la the overly Instagrammable Museum of Ice Cream or the van Gogh projector show). As Barry Threw, Gray Area's executive director, told us, "The opening of TECHS-MECHS starts a conversation about who is included in the histories we tell about technology, and who has access to write its future. Gray Area's mission is to demonstrate the unique ability of artists to hold a mirror to society, and Rafael Lozano-Hemmer has been expanding consciousness with the rhetorical power of media art for over 30 years."

“Pulse Topology” (2021). Image courtesy of Gray Area and Joy Ding.

As a retrospective, the work exhibited spans about two decades and includes the premieres of some standout pieces. The participatory “Pulse Topology” (2021), where 3,000 dangling LED lights blink the varying rhythms of visitors’ recorded heartbeats, had its West Coast premiere in the main hall of Gray Area — looking like an otherworldly pulsing starry sky over TECHS-MECHS’ opening night audience.

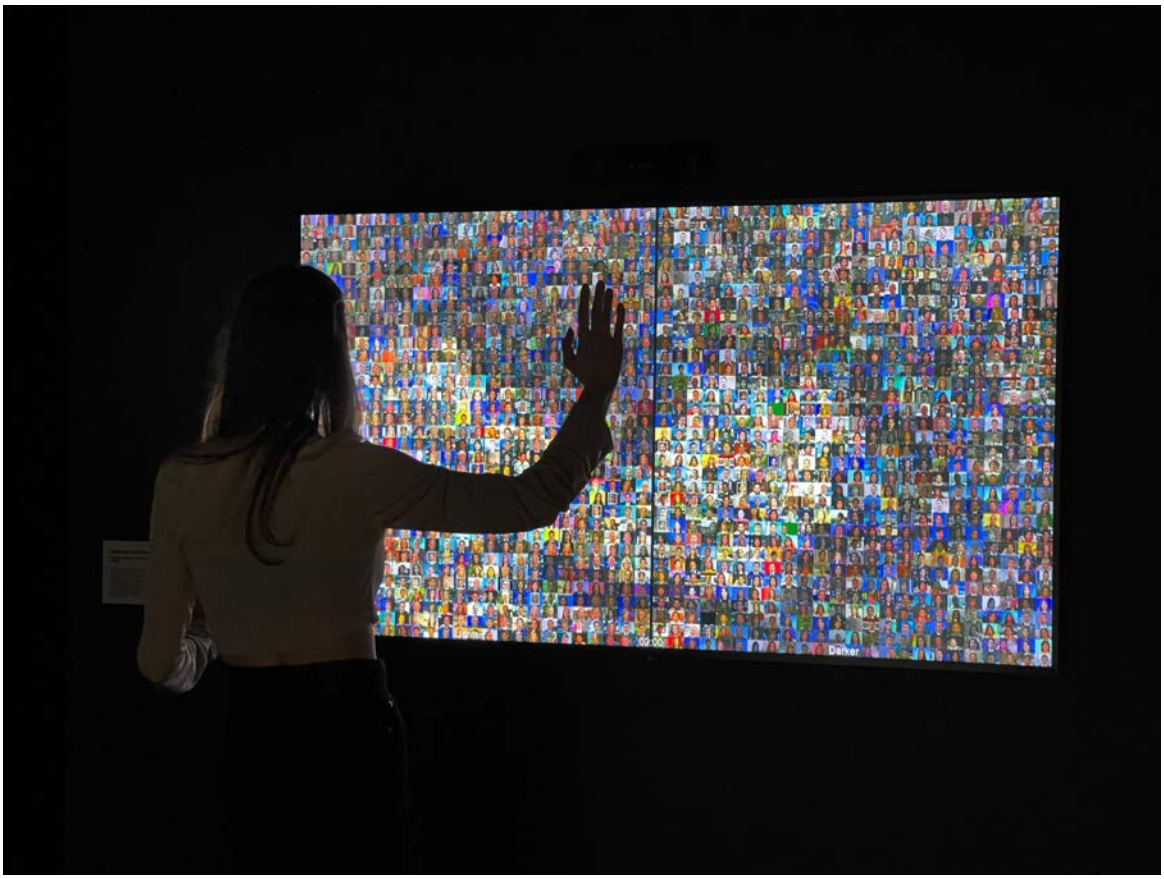
Guillermo Gómez-Peña. Image courtesy of Gray Area and Barak Shrama.

The opening night also featured the poetry of Mission neighborhood native and anti-border activist, Guillermo Gómez-Peña, in a provocative and often humorous Spanglish performance. Some of his meta-commentary: “The artist can always find useless aesthetic, poetic, political, erotic, ritual and playful functions for an otherwise dehumanizing machine. This is the case of Mexi-Canadian artist Rafael Lozano-Hemmer.”



"Sway" (2016). Image courtesy of Gray Area and Joy Ding.

The exhibition wasn't all light and lights, however — one piece, Sway (2016), is an adult-sized upside-down noose that ever-so-slightly oscillates from side to side every three to four minutes — representing every time ICE arrests someone.



"Reporters Without Borders" (2007), high-resolution interactive display that simultaneously shows 864 video clips of TV broadcasts from the U.S. and Mexico within viewer's shadow, continuously re-classifying clips by gender, nationality, and race. Image courtesy of Gray Area and Joy Ding.

Throughout the exhibition, the work uses technology as a medium to explore "identity both culturally and individually." It succeeds in raising questions of how technology is used to bring people together and to drive them apart. You don't want to miss it.

TECHS-MECHS is open from March 16 - May 31, 2023 at Gray Area at 2665 Mission Street, San Francisco — open Wednesday - Saturday 1 p.m. - 8 p.m., and Sunday 10 a.m. - 6 p.m. Get tickets here.

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Feature image courtesy of Gray Area, © Drew Altizer Photography.

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"Lozano-Hemmer, is a Mexican-born scientist who, while studying chemistry in research and turned to making immersive audio-visual artwork installations." It's a pretty cool origin story.

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Holly is Bay Area-based writer. She contributes to the New York Times, Insider, and GreenBiz, among others.

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