

“Science needs to stay objective, yet to bring our full selves into the scary future that is being revealed by climate science, we need emotions, connections, community, and creativity. If we don’t carve out spaces for diverse spiritual and aesthetic values, we lose sight of why we need to be environmental stewards. The Earth is home and we are the ancestors of the future.”

—Nina Elder, Artist

Preface

Suzanne Sbarge

Executive Director, 516 ARTS

Species in Peril Along the Rio Grande: Contemporary Artists Respond, cocurated by Josie Lopez, PhD, and Subhankar Banerjee, features commissioned and existing artworks by 23 artists based in our region, highlighting perspectives on species undergoing die-offs, disruptions, and population declines within the Rio Grande watershed. Through the eyes of contemporary artists, the show raises ethical and cultural questions about human impact on the natural world. It is accompanied by a series of programs with 42 partners throughout the interstate, cross-border region of the Rio Grande, including art exhibitions, murals, speakers, workshops, performances, and outdoor activities, all designed to engage participants in a process of learning, dialogue, and creative thinking about the environmental issues that affect us all.

When we approach new projects at 516 ARTS, we ask, “Why here, why now?” We are always listening to find out what feels most pressing to people in the community and what among those themes can serve as connective tissue for bringing people together around art. During my 13 years of directing 516 ARTS in its current incarnation, the top recurring themes have been our environment and the nearby international border. We look at where we are on this planet, in this particular place and time, and that brings us to the river—the lifeblood of our place in the desert.

Throughout the process of organizing *Species in Peril Along the Rio Grande*, my mantra has been “How does the river connect us?” This simple question has helped to guide the process of exploring how the water, microbes, plants, animals, and the river itself all connect us to the vast issue of the global biological crisis. It is our hope that our approach of bringing together artists, scientists, historians, and environmentalists will serve as a model for regional collaborations around the global environmental issues that can seem overwhelming. Focusing on the life, death, and struggles taking place before our very eyes is the place to start.

In this time when our governments are clearly not bringing us together across borders, the role of cultural and educational organizations and institutions is essential in making this work happen. Through an open process of invitations, calls, meetings around the region, networking, and collaboration, we have forged an intercity, cross-border partnership with four cities at its core: Albuquerque, Las Cruces, El Paso, and Ciudad Juárez. 516 ARTS, as an independent organization, also has the freedom and agility to bring state university programs together to make a bigger impact. The Art & Ecology Program at the University of New Mexico (UNM), the University Art Museum at New Mexico State University (NMSU), the Rubin Center for the Visual Arts at the University of Texas at El Paso (UTEP), Universidad Autónoma de Ciudad Juárez (UACJ), and Museo de Arte de Ciudad Juárez are now connected in a new way, and we look forward to continuing to strengthen cross-border arts programming and activism in the years to come.

My last mantra of this preface is “We’re all in this together.” As we look to the future of life on Earth, and in our region, I believe we need to focus our energies on creative problem-solving for all beings and the planet as a living organism. Human exceptionalism has brought us to this moment on the brink, and now it is essential that we think about our collective survival across borders and across species, both human and nonhuman.