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## How I Made This: Sandy Rodriguez's Pigments from Indigenous History

BY **JULIA TRAVERS**

February 9, 2021 6:12pm



"Mapa de los Child Detention Centers, Family Separations and Other Atrocities" by Sandy Rodriguez

SANDY RODRIGUEZ

Five hundred years after the conquest of Mexico, **Sandy Rodriguez** (<https://www.artnews.com/t/sandy-rodriguez/>) is weaving together old and new stories of the United States borderlands. "There is a kind of communion, a uniting, with the *tlacuilos*, who were the painters, scholars, scribes of the colonial period... it's about affirming an indigenous artistic practice and reclaiming an art history that is very much of this region and of our culture," Rodriguez (<https://www.studiosandyrodriguez.com/>) said of making her series, "Codex Rodriguez-Mondragón." This ongoing multimedia project includes the "Mapa de los Child Detention Centers, Family Separations and Other Atrocities," pictured above.

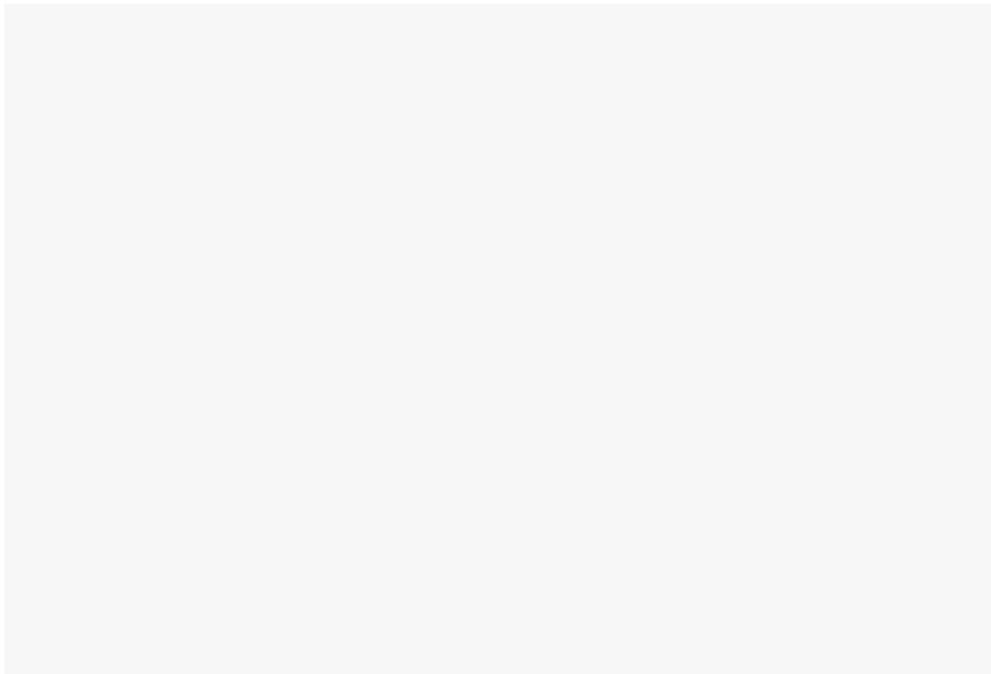
Rodriguez's maps and portraits layer images of separated migrant families with Mayan and Nahua iconography and ancient botanical recipes. As part of her artistic process, she camps along the border, studying and gathering traditional materials to make pigments for her paintings. She is institutionally trained and comes from a family of Mexican artists.

Rodriguez is inspired by historic documents like the [Florentine Codex \(https://www.wdl.org/en/item/10096/\)](https://www.wdl.org/en/item/10096/), which was made by a Franciscan missionary and Indigenous scribes during the colonization of Mexico. This illustrated manuscript described the Aztec religion, calendar, social life, and use of plants, as well as the Spanish conquest itself. The [book \(https://www.amazon.com/Colors-New-World-Materials-Florentine/dp/1606063294\)](https://www.amazon.com/Colors-New-World-Materials-Florentine/dp/1606063294) *The Colors of the New World: Artists, Materials and the Creation of the Florentine Codex* by Diana Magaloni Kerpel helped her further explore Indigenous artistry and color symbolism. Her map contains figures and colors from the Florentine Codex, the locations of child detention [centers \(https://projects.propublica.org/graphics/migrant-shelters-near-you\)](https://projects.propublica.org/graphics/migrant-shelters-near-you), and memories of her field research, among other imagery.

In late 2018, Rodriguez traveled the Western U.S., “when we started hearing about [the] family separation policy and proliferation of child detention centers,” she says. “It was a moment to reflect on the most urgent stories of the day and then look historically at cycles of violence against our communities, and layer that with colonial texts, along with my field study.”

## THE MATERIALS

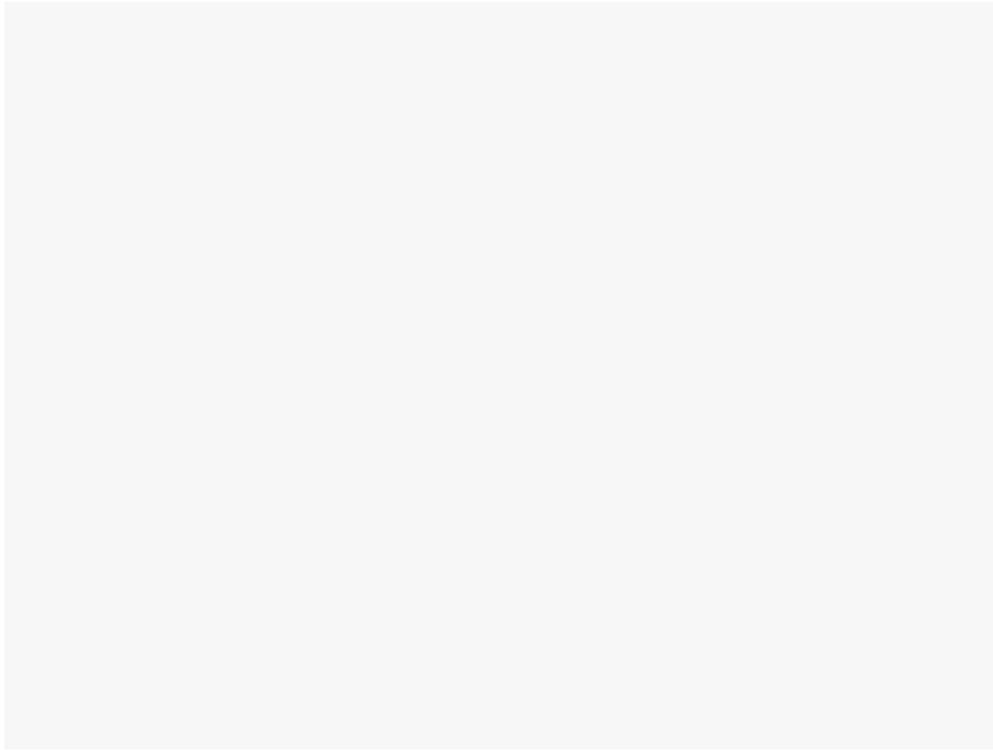
### 1. Field Studies



Sandy Rodriguez's field studies  
SANDY RODRIGUEZ

Rodriguez takes traditional amate paper into the field. Amate is handmade from mulberry bark and various species of ficus; it was prohibited during the colonial period. The Spanish would burn artworks on amate, because they were symbols of Indigenous culture. Rodriguez sources this paper from a family in Puebla Mexico that has made it for five generations. The child detention map is on a large sheet of amate (about 8 feet by 4 feet). Rodriguez collects plants, minerals, insects, lichen and other materials to alchemize for her palette.

## 2. Color Processing in the Studio

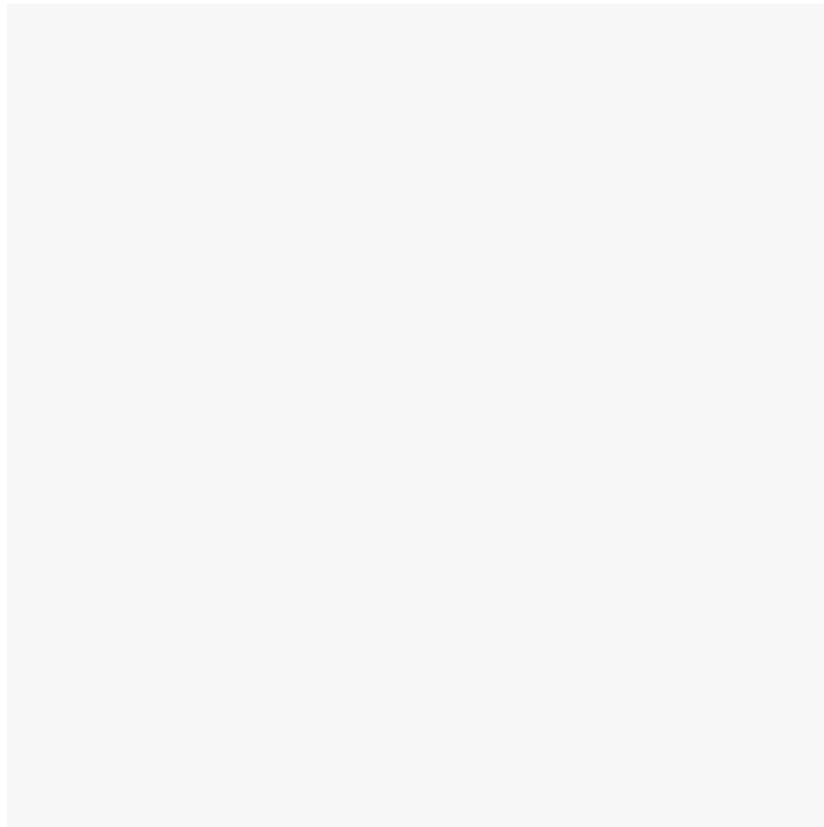


Rodriguez's color processing  
SANDY RODRIGUEZ

The colors Rodriguez uses are hand-processed on a stone slab with a palette knife and muller (<https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/muller>). She said they are mixed with gum arabic, honey, and, “sometimes, a drop of wild thyme oil to prevent bacteria in plant-based colors.”

As she creates colorants from a certain region, Rodriguez makes a color chart. She notes “the pH level of the water, the duration of the time for extracting, [and] ratios of binder.”

### 3. Mushroom-Yellow Pigment



Phaeolus schweinitzii mushroom  
SANDY RODRIGUEZ

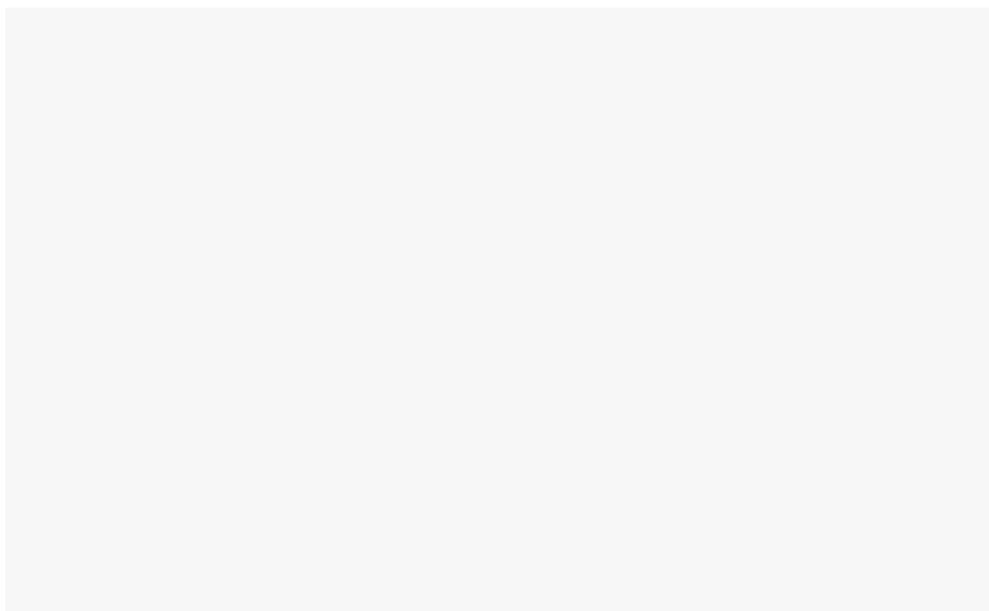
Rodriguez made some of the yellows in this map with the mushroom *Phaeolus schweinitzii*. “You have to break off the outer edge, and it’s wet and it’s spongy... you put it in a dehydrator for about 12 to 15 hours so that it gets a cracker-like crispness.” At this point, it can be stored in a jar until color extraction — “I basically put it in some hot water and then do a simmer.” Find this yellow outlining California, the Golden State, where she sourced the mushrooms.

## 4. Other Earth Tones



Rodriguez also uses ochres, or clay-based pigments. Cochinilla is one of the reds in the map — a pre-Columbian hue produced by an insect that eats cacti. She said, in the Indigenous works she studied, translucent reds like cochinilla signify the terrestrial realm, while a more opaque iron oxide-based red references death and the underworld. The reddish border between Mexico and Texas, between the weeping mothers and detention camps, is made of the iron oxide **hematite** (<https://www.minerals.net/mineral/hematite.aspx>).

## 5. Cool and Neutral Colors



Sandy Rodriguez's work table  
SANDY RODRIGUEZ

Rodriguez produces various iterations of the historic pigments Maya Green and Maya Blue with Mexican yellow ochre. Find this green under the children's bodies, who are shown sleeping on the floor with emergency blankets.

The blue seen in the sky of the landscape in Southern Nevada is made of the mineral [azurite](https://www.minerals.net/mineral/azurite.aspx) (<https://www.minerals.net/mineral/azurite.aspx>). “[The] particle size is such that when the light hits it, it almost shimmers. It’s rough to the touch.”

And Rodriguez experiments with the bark of the logwood tree, “a beautiful reddish brown bark” that can also produce shades of pink, purple and gray. After heat extraction, if you add iron to this material, it will turn black. Add alum for purple, vinegar for honey-brown, or an ice cube for pink.

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## You Will Not Be Forgotten: Artist Sandy Rodriguez Calls Us to Witness and Act

[Freedom for Immigrants](#) - May 04, 2020

*by Julia Travers*

“You will not be forgotten,” artist and educator Sandy Rodriguez promises the seven children portrayed in her recent art show at the [Charlie James Gallery](#) in Los Angeles. These Central American child migrants all died in U.S. Customs and Border Protection (CBP) custody during 2018 and 2019. Rodriguez, who is institutionally trained and also comes from a family of Mexican artists, painted each child as part of a larger series called Codex Rodriguez-Mondragón (after her father’s and mother’s surnames).

In 2021, 500 years will have passed since the conquest of Mexico. Rodriguez’s art examines how much and how little has changed in that span of time. “Here we are, 500 years later, with a lot of similar kinds of violence on Indigenous bodies, violence on communities that have inhabited or

have inhabited this region for thousands of years,” Rodriguez says. Her works explore this enduring trauma, and honor and reanimate Indigenous traditions and knowledge.

Her Codex references, in part, the 16th century Florentine Codex, which was created by a Franciscan missionary and Indigenous scribes writing in Spanish, Latin and Nahuatl (the Aztec tongue). It served as an aid for colonizers and is also now a crucial and singular documentation of pre-colonial life. Rodriguez also draws from the colonial-era medicinal manuscript *Codex de la Cruz-Badiano*, which an Indigenous doctor wrote as he endured the 1521 conquest and subsequent plague. Rodriguez follows in the steps of other Chicana artists who have created their own time-transcendent codices in response to these kinds of historic texts. She sees herself as a *tlacuila*— a Native scribe.

The Codex Rodriguez-Mondragón consists of maps, portraits, ephemera and other elements that explore and document lives, losses and culture along the U.S. borders. Rodriguez, who has family on both sides of the border, has carried out years of research into the history of these lands, the botanical makeup of their ecosystems, and ancient creative practices that endure.



Part of Sandy Rodriguez’s show at the Charlie

James Gallery (image courtesy of the artist and Charlie James Gallery, Los Angeles, photo by Michael Underwood)

Her works are made of natural materials including handmade, traditional dyes and a Mexican paper called *amate*, crafted from mulberry bark and various species of ficus. The Spanish were known to burn works on amate, which signaled Indigenous cultural transmission. She uses *cochinilla* (a bright, pre-Columbian red pigment), orchid bulbs, insects, gold leaf and other

natural materials to create a family of works that weave together witnessing, mourning, honoring and revival.

The names and ages of the seven children Rodriguez memorialized with portraits are:

*Mariee Juarez, who was one when she died.*

*Carlos Gregorio “Goyito” Hernandez Vasquez, who was 16.*

*Wilmer Josué Ramírez Vásquez, who was two.*

*Juan de León Gutierrez, who was 16.*

*Felipe Alonzo Gomez / Felipe Gómez Alonzo (different names were given by the LA Times and CNN), who was eight.*

*Jakelin Amei Rosmery Caal Maquin, who was seven.*

*Darlyn Cristabel Cordova-Valle, who was 10. She died in 2018 and her death was the first [child death](#) in CBP Custody since 2010.*



*Sandy Rodriguez,*

*paintings of Juan de León Gutierrez and Darlyn Cristabel Cordova-Valle (image courtesy of the artist and Charlie James Gallery, Los Angeles, photo by Michael Underwood)*

Most of these children died from communicable illnesses in overcrowded CBP detention facilities in the Southwest. While researching this series, Rodriguez says the “field study takes place in the spring, when families and children are being caged underneath the freeways in El Paso. The images are circulating. By the time I drive a thousand miles from Arizona into El Paso, they'd already moved the families. Amongst those families are children like Felipe Alonzo-Gomez, who died just a few weeks later due to heat.”



Sandy Rodriguez, painting

of Felipe Alonzo Gómez, age eight (image courtesy of the artist and Charlie James Gallery, Los Angeles, photo by Michael Underwood)

Rodriguez's Codex series contains a large, about 8-foot-tall map that shows the detention centers where the children died. It also includes a pictorial recipe drawn from the historical medicinal codex, which describes how to heal *susto*, or trauma. Icons show where plumeria flowers, fox blood, swallow's nests and other ingredients can be found in the local landscape surrounding the centers. A Charlie James Gallery [catalog](#) states: "Ix Chel and Tenten In na are the grandmother

goddesses from the Mayan and Nahua pantheons, and they flank the sides of the map. Both deities are associated with medicine, medicinal herbs, healers and midwives, and are summoned to watch over us and these children on their journey to the land of the dead so that they can return to visit next fall and every fall.”



*You Will Not Be Forgotten Mapa for the children killed in custody of US Customs and Border Protection*, Hand-processed watercolor on amate paper 94.5 × 47 inches, 2019. Image courtesy of the artist

In 2018, in a moment that seems prescient of the COVID-19 pandemic, which places detained immigrants at great risk, Rodriguez [spoke](#) of the scribes who created the Florentine Codex with the *LA Times*. “There is a massive plague that happens at the end of the book... And they’re all dying, so they can’t go out and get color, and so everything is black and white. They end up sequestering themselves so they can tell their story.” She added that a sense of the world ending carries forward into our current era.

She tells us the “human rights crisis at the border is still ongoing ... We still have 70,000 children caged across the U.S. There's still unaccompanied minors going to court and making decisions on their own.”

These enduring struggles drive Rodriguez’s work. She hopes “something will occur in viewers to inspire them to ask more questions, have more conversations, take some action, register to volunteer -- to do something with that experience.” At a walk-through of the LA show, she invited the Young Center for Immigrant Children’s Rights “to tell [attendees] about the upcoming training days, so they could find out how they could [become involved](#) in child advocacy, or how they could be of support.”

Rodriguez will also display one of her works in June at the [Denver Art Museum](#). She continues to observe, learn, dig, record, collaborate, alchemize and make, offering visual expressions that bridge time, space, language and culture. She is propping a door open for us so that we may encounter, honor and better understand the lives of and crimes against Indigenous peoples and immigrants, and hear the voices of Native foremothers and fathers; she is translating their journeys into living maps and holding space for all of us to enter.



Sandy Rodriguez, portion of “Mapa for the children killed in custody of U.S. Customs and Border Protection,” (image courtesy of the artist and Charlie James Gallery, Los Angeles, photo by Michael Underwood)

*Cover art: Sandy Rodriguez, paintings of Juan de León Gutierrez and Darlyn Cristabel Cordova-Valle (image courtesy of the artist and Charlie James Gallery, Los Angeles, photo by Michael Underwood)*

*Julia Travers writes news, analysis and creative pieces. She often covers science, social justice and the arts. Find more of her writing at [jtravers.journoportfolio.com](http://jtravers.journoportfolio.com) or on twitter @traversjul.*

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