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## From Exile to Artist: Tatiana Garmendia's city gallery installation centers the displaced

by [Lisa Edge \(/users/lisa-edge\)](/users/lisa-edge) | August 30th, 2017



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["No Hiding Place Down Here" by Tatiana Garmendia.](#)

[Photo provided by the Garmendia](#)

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Inside the Seattle Presents gallery, [Tatiana Garmendia's \(http://tatianagarmendia.com/\)](http://tatianagarmendia.com/) exhibition, "No Hiding Place Down Here," addresses one of the city's most visible problems: homelessness. In January, 11,643 people in King County were without a permanent home. Of that number, 5,485 were unsheltered, often in cars, tents or exposed to the elements. Garmendia faces this reality every day while driving to work. Alongside the road she sees tents as well as havens configured with cardboard and tarp.

"When you're homeless you're visible and you're invisible. And there's no hiding that there's something broken in our system," Garmendia said. "In this space I wanted it to be safe for both sides. For the privileged and the unprivileged."

In the middle of the sparse space is an eggshell-hued tent made from screen scrim, a material often used in theater productions. Above it, square sections of scrim hang from a clothesline attached to the wall. On each one, Garmendia depicts real people who are experiencing homelessness: a man lights a cigarette and in another a woman stands with a forlorn look upon her face. The dark gray outline of the figures is from a pigment Garmendia made herself.

"I swept dirt from the street and I added acrylic polymer and a little bit of ink to make it a little bit more visible," Garmendia said.

"No Hiding Place Down Here" is a symbolic encampment, but Garmendia isn't someone with pedestrian knowledge of displacement. She's lived it. Born in Havana, Cuba after the Bay of Pigs, her life changed dramatically when she was 6 years old. Garmendia's father was a doctor but his family was political and they supported the revolution. When her family fell in disfavor with the government Garmendia, her parents and older brother were evicted from their home and placed in a shelter. With only one mattress to share, they slept in shifts. Within a couple months her father was taken away by officials for questioning.

"They tortured him for two years," Garmendia said. "When my father was finally released he was so deteriorated physically and mentally that he was incapable of anything."

The family was able to leave the country for Madrid with only the clothes on their backs. They lived in a shelter and received clothing from a church. Within two years of the start of their ordeal the International Rescue Committee paid for her family's passage to the United States. After staying with host families in New York they made their way to Miami with her paternal relatives who had left after the revolution, but before Fidel Castro closed the borders.

Once in the states her father returned to the medical profession after passing the boards. His first position was in Pennsylvania but the torture he endured permanently altered him.

"He never really recovered and so he would get work and then he would lose the work. Whenever he lost his job, we lost a place," Garmendia said. "All of those anxieties were a part of my childhood."



Artist Tatiana Garmendia creates her own paint by adding dirt from the street to pigment and ink. Photo by Jon Williams

The instability of her formative years is etched into her memory.

By the time she turned 11 years old she'd already lived in 11 places. The instability of her formative years is etched into her memory.

"When we were at the camp for political dissidents there was a lot of violence. That's always affected my sense of boundaries and safety," she said. "I didn't know about how those experiences would pan out in life."

Her art training began in Paris at the American University. She traveled across Europe learning from the masters. After returning to the states, Garmendia earned a BFA from Florida International University and a MFA from Pratt Institute of Art. An art conference brought her to Seattle in 1993. Great weather and smiling faces sold Garmendia on the Pacific Northwest. Today she's a faculty member at Seattle Central College. She's exhibited across the country, in Europe and the Dominican Republic.

"Those early experiences made me more aware of the human suffering that comes with not knowing if you have a safe place. Not knowing if you will have a place."

Creating the installation brought up memories of the tumult she experienced in her early years. This is the first time the inter-disciplinary artist is publicly sharing the details of her life.

"I hadn't realized how much was suppressed," Garmendia said. "Those early experiences made me more aware of the human suffering that comes with not knowing if you have a safe place. Not knowing if you will have a place."



Artist Tatiana Garmendia and photographer Scott Story, background, discuss their installation. Garmendia speaks of her own battles with homelessness. Photo by Jon Williams

The installation also includes a five-minute documentary projected onto the tent and wall. Garmendia narrates her story of being homeless but not unsheltered over moving stills shot of unauthorized camps in the Seattle area by photographer Scott Story. The video is a projection of the outside into an art gallery, which is often viewed as sacred space. Garmendia said it was important for people who are homeless to see themselves in her work.

"Because artists speak to the privilege and very often is divorced from content. Is divorced from real human experiences," she said. "I have no problems with paintings that are stripes and dots and splashes. And I teach it and I love it but it's devoid of what aches in us. It's just not touching on our realities."

Garmendia's work is the third installment in the "Dialogues in Art: Exhibitions on Homelessness (<http://www.seattle.gov/arts/dialogues-in-art-exhibitions-on-homelessness>)" series produced by the Seattle Office of Arts and Culture. Prior to her exhibition [Xavier Lopez told his personal story](http://realchangenews.org/2017/05/24/artist-xavier-lopez-jr-shares-his-personal-experience-homelessness-city-gallery) (<http://realchangenews.org/2017/05/24/artist-xavier-lopez-jr-shares-his-personal-experience-homelessness-city-gallery>) of experiencing homelessness as a child and [George Lee addressed the meaning of home](http://realchangenews.org/2017/06/28/salon-domicile-artist-george-lee-views-homelessness-through-sleep-and-home) (<http://realchangenews.org/2017/06/28/salon-domicile-artist-george-lee-views-homelessness-through-sleep-and-home>) for people in a tiny home village and officials addressing homelessness.

"No Hiding Place Down Here" captures the fragility of living on the street. All the pieces can easily be swept away with no trace of what was formerly there.

**WHAT:** "No Hiding Place Down Here"

**WHEN:** Runs until Oct. 14. First Thursday reception Sept. 7, 5:30 p.m. - 7:30 p.m.; gallery

open Thursdays Noon - 2 p.m. but it can also be viewed from the outside

**WHERE:** Seattle Presents Gallery at Seattle Municipal Tower, 5th Avenue & Columbia St.

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