



PORTRAIT OF A LOCAL ARTS ECOSYSTEM  
**IMPERIAL COUNTY**

California Arts Council  
Grant Making Evaluation

By John Carnwath and Sarina Guerra



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# PROJECT OVERVIEW

This report is part of a Field Scan commissioned by the California Arts Council. The Field Scan combines statistical analysis of the available data on nonprofit arts organizations in California with qualitative research on how the arts are supported in three local communities to provide deep analysis of California's arts infrastructure and access to funding through the lenses of equity and access. The other components of the Field Scan are available for download on CAC's website [arts.ca.gov] and can be made available in other formats upon request.

## METHODOLOGY

To complement the analysis of existing datasets, which are limited to nonprofit organizations and likely biased, we explored how the arts are created, shared, and supported through qualitative research in three dissimilar communities across California. We selected the communities based on three criteria:

1. Potential to learn about parts of the arts ecosystem that aren't captured in quantitative datasets;
2. Potential representativeness of other communities across California;
3. Potential for successful community engagement.

In each community, we recruited local "Connectors," who served as our primary contacts, and helped us identify and recruit other local artists

and community leaders for the study. After an initial round of video conferences and phone interviews, we visited each community for two days to meet all available interviewees in person, experience the settings in which they live and work, and meet with additional artists and culture bearers. A final videoconference was held to share preliminary findings with the community members who contributed to the research in each location and receive feedback. This research was conducted between summer of 2021 and spring of 2022.

## A NOTE ON QUALITATIVE RESEARCH

This report summarizes qualitative data collected through interviews, observations, and group conversations. Qualitative research provides an excellent means of capturing the experiences and perspectives of research participants. Since questions are answered in narrative form, researchers can understand the specific context for each respondent's reply, and also observe how respondents make sense of their experiences and what causal inferences they draw. However, one cannot assume that the views gathered through qualitative research proportionately reflect the views and experiences of the community as a whole. Nonetheless, the range of perspectives shared by the diverse group of participants consulted for this Field Scan can shed light on challenges and opportunities in the field.

# INTRODUCTION

Along California’s southern border, between San Diego County and the Arizona state line, lies Imperial County. On the drive east from San Diego, the winding road through dry rocky hills opens up to a view of the vast expanse of the Imperial Valley — a great plain, fringed, on a clear day, by far-off mountains — as one enters Imperial County. Hot and dry, the valley is by nature a desert that has been transformed into one of the most productive agricultural regions of the state through an irrigation system that is fed by the Colorado River. The miraculous transformation that irrigation brings about is on full display when, for stretches of the drive, the fertile soil on one side of the highway brings forth row upon row of vegetable crops, while there is nothing but miles of brown dust on the side of the highway. From the county line, it’s another hour of driving before one reaches El Centro, Calexico, Brawley and several smaller communities that stretch up the center of the valley, from the Mexican border northward towards the Salton Sea (a man-made lake, created by accident, that has turned into an environmental disaster).

The total population of Imperial County is around 180,000. The county seat, El Centro, is also the largest town with around 45,000 inhabitants. According to the US Census, 86% of the county population identifies as Hispanic or Latina/o/x, and three quarters of the inhabitants live in households where a language other than English is spoken. 9% of the county’s population iden-

tifies as non-Hispanic White, while the census categories Black/African American, Native American/Alaska Native, Asian, and “Two or more races” each make up about 2% to 3% of the population.<sup>1</sup> The local economy is largely based in agriculture,<sup>2</sup> although the two state prisons, Imperial Irrigation District, and border protection also contribute significant levels of employment.<sup>3</sup>

Our initial outreach to community members, inquiring about the possibility of researching the arts ecosystem in Imperial County, was met with a mix of community pride and a perceived need to calibrate our expectations. On the one hand there were memories of elaborate musicals produced by community theaters, noteworthy bands and dance programs at local high schools, and community support expressed through donations at fundraisers and local businesses sponsoring events. On the other was the admission, expressed either apologetically or with some degree of dismay, that there really isn’t much of an arts infrastructure in Imperial County.

As we got further into our conversations, the responses became far more nuanced: Community support and access to the arts are spotty, but

1 US Census Quickfacts: <https://www.census.gov/quickfacts/imperialcountycalifornia>  
 2 <https://agcom.imperialcounty.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/08/2021-Economic-Contribution-of-Imperial-County-Ag.pdf>  
 3 <https://www.labormarketinfo.edd.ca.gov/majorer/countymajorer.asp?CountyCode=000025>



there’s a hum of cultural activity and creativity that often flies under the radar. We heard about creative businesses, cafes and restaurants hosting events, arts educators who bring their creative resources to the community, artists working off the grid, lively participation in church music programs, and much more.

While there may not be many full time professional artists in Imperial County, we encountered several community members who are deeply committed to the arts. For many of those people, the arts are something essential and connected to daily life, not an escape or leisure activity. Indeed, one community member maintained that the idea of leisure activities runs counter to the immigrant work ethic that shapes the local culture.

Some community members suggested that in order to understand how arts and culture operate in Imperial County it is necessary to be aware of the significant socio-economic discrepancies within the region. In some places, the discrepancies are clearly visible when looking at residential neighborhoods on one side of the train tracks compared to those on the other. To some extent the socio-economic disparities reflect the racial/ethnic/linguistic/immigration histories of the local population. For instance, we were informed, most of the farmland is owned by well-established non-Hispanic White families, while the farm laborers are almost exclusively Latina/o/x.

## INTERVIEW SAMPLE

Our research in Imperial County was clearly shaped by the two local community members who joined the project as “Connectors,” Sarina Guerra (who’s voice you will hear throughout this report in the “View from the Valley” sections) and Anne Irigoyen. Their primary roles were to identify and manage communications with interviewees for the project, drawing on their personal networks and their experiences with the arts in Imperial County. The roster of interviewees is undoubtedly shaped by the social circles and creative interests of the two Connectors, but they also went to considerable lengths to round out the pool of interviewees by recruiting people from outside their pre-existing networks.

We didn’t explicitly ask interviewees for demographic data, but in our conversations about half indicated that they identify as Latina/o/x. The non-Hispanic interviewees are slightly older, on average, with ages ranging approximately from the mid-40s to late 60s. The Latina/o/x interviewees reflect a wider range of ages with the youngest being in their mid-20s and the oldest over 60.

About half of the non-Hispanic interviewees came to Imperial County as adults, having previously lived elsewhere in the US. The Latina/o/x community members we spoke with reflect a wide range of personal backgrounds including one whose family has been living in Imperial County for five generations and no longer speaks Spanish, one from a low income family of immigrants, one who grew up in a family that has an established agricultural business, and one who only recently moved across the border from Mexicali and preferred to be interviewed in Spanish.

Through our interviews we heard perspectives on music, theater, visual arts, dance, and film, but only two or three of the people we spoke to consider art-making their primary occupation. The others are connected to the arts through their leadership in the community, administrative roles in organizations that offer arts programs, and/or their personal creative practices.

During our site visit, the pool of people we consulted expanded organically as interviewees introduced us to their associates and we met people at various arts venues around the county.



## A VIEW FROM THE VALLEY

Hi there! My name is Sarina Guerra, and the Imperial Valley is my home.

Throughout this report, I'll be sharing my thoughts and perspectives on the findings, not as a researcher, but as someone who has grown up here and experienced the arts in Imperial County throughout my life.

I signed onto this project as one of the local Connectors tasked to help researchers find and interview artists and cultural leaders from a wide range of backgrounds. Unbeknownst to me initially, this role would lead me to re-examine my identity, my community, the opportunities I had (or didn't have) and the people who set the stage for my continued artistic evolution.

I'm from the city of Brawley, a centrally located mid-size community relative to others in the county. In speaking to those unfamiliar with the area, I usually mention that my hometown has exactly one high school, one post office, and one McDonald's. That usually gets the point across. Culturally speaking, I am no outlier in my community. Individual members of my immediate family identify as Hispanic, Mexican-American, Latino/Latinx, or Chicana/Chicanx for a variety of reasons. At home, my family spoke almost exclusively English with the exception of Spanglish at get-togethers and the few verses of mariachi music my sisters and I had picked up from our parents.

By high school graduation, I was itching for more than what I'd seen here, and went to Arizona State University, where I quickly learned that my academic and artistic oppor-

tunities growing up paled in comparison to many of my classmates'. After graduating, I began the arduous process of creating my artistic identity and felt called to return to my roots. Little did I know that in late-2019, I would get stuck at home for much longer than anticipated due to the pandemic.

Though there were some trends that were always readily observable — strong familial relations, generational ties to the land, a pervasive element of scarcity and the resulting communal approach to resources — upon returning home with new perspectives, I now noticed a conformist social structure built on a bedrock of religious conservatism. This seemed to be at odds with my new-found identity as a queer Chicanx; labels that I previously hesitated to use as I'm not sure that I ever felt like anything other than, well, me. If the Phoenix metropolis had taught me what it meant to exist as a racial minority, my hometown had now shown me what it felt like to be relegated to the margins of even my own culture.

I have been both humbled and made whole by the many incredible community members we interviewed across the Valley for this project. While some of them were my old friends, teachers, and neighbors, others were completely new to my social circle, though as is often the case here, everyone felt familiar. As you read this report, keep an eye out for "View from the Valley" sections to compare my unique yet fairly average experiences as they coincide with the main body of research.



# FINDINGS

## ART AS OPPORTUNITY

One of the most striking things we noticed about the way people in Imperial County talk about arts and cultural activities was that it is rarely set aside from everyday life. For many of our interviewees, art is not a hobby that is pursued purely for entertainment or recreational purposes, nor a calling pursued without regard for one’s opportunity to make a living. Whereas nationally many entering the arts field may feel torn between pursuing their artistic passion and pursuing opportunities that are likely to lead to more sustainable careers, we got the sense that those who pursue the arts in Imperial County do so precisely because it offers them opportunities that they don’t see elsewhere in the Valley: opportunities to generate income, opportunities to travel, opportunities to grow beyond the limitations of their immediate surroundings.

We saw this even in the opportunities for children to create and share artwork. When we asked how the community supports and celebrates the arts, several of the examples we heard about were tied to fundraisers for various causes. There’s an art show that benefits a local hospital, and students’ art was auctioned off at a fundraiser for the Imperial Office of Education’s Foundation for Education. A student receiving private art instruction donated work to be sold in support of a local museum, and children’s dance and musical

performances are also frequently integrated into fundraising events.

In describing some of the noteworthy arts programs at high schools in the area, the fact that the participating students had opportunities to travel was highlighted in particular. Beginning with Jimmie Cannon—one of the first Black teachers in the county and longtime leader of the band at Central Union High—part of the appeal of the program has been the opportunity to travel and compete around the country. Similarly, one of the frequently mentioned features of Southwest Academy for the Performing Arts’ dance program is that it allows students to perform in places like Disneyworld and Washington, DC, in addition to performing in large-scale musicals attended by many local residents.

The opportunities created by the arts are not lost on youths growing up in Imperial County. Several of the people we spoke with who grew up locally realized while they were still in high school that they could earn money in the arts. We heard of school-aged kids using their father’s screen printing press to sell t-shirts they designed, a painter who “started selling art in high school as a means to buy lunch,” budding musicians playing their first paid gigs, and enterprising youngsters finding a lucrative pastime in producing hip hop concerts. It is also telling that accredited CTE (Career Technical Education) programs that train stage



technicians and production managers can be an important source of support for high school arts departments.

For many creative youths, the arts are also seen as a way of leaving Imperial County, either literally or figuratively. That may mean using one's artistic talents to get into a college outside of the Valley or tapping into national or international arts markets online. We heard of one local Mariachi, for instance, who went on to join the successful group Mariachi Sol De Mexico and now tours nationally and internationally. For many of our interviewees leaving the county isn't an attractive option, due to their strong familial ties and their sense of connection to the Imperial Valley; however, the arts can still allow them to "escape" by selling their work in wider markets and gaining recognition from online networks and audiences. Short of getting out, the arts can also be a means of experiencing the outside world without leaving home, whether through locally produced productions of Broadway hits, touring ballet companies, or Hip Hop concerts.

A final critical role that the arts play in Imperial County lies in celebrating the community itself. Incorporating displays of local artists' talents, fundraisers for community organizations turn into celebrations of the community's willingness and ability to invest in itself. Celebrations of student achievements are enlivened through the arts. Perhaps most visibly, the arts are a central component of the longstanding annual festivals that celebrate and mark the unique identity of each of the local communities in the county (discussed in more detail on p. 23).

## A VIEW FROM THE VALLEY

*Though some of our interviewees expressed that they saw art as an opportunity here, I can't say that reflects my particular experience. In fact, I'd say my artistic dreams have largely been a burden to carry. My parents and ancestors have sacrificed a lot in the name of their childrens' academic success, and so it is expected that a steady job and long-term financial security should follow. As a queer woman of color, I am aware that pursuing a career in the arts might compound existing obstacles. Pursuing this path is, for me, less a financial strategy and more the result of a relentless calling synonymous with life itself. I've found that because I operate outside of existing systems and stereotypes, trying to explain to those closest to me that I'm an Artist (and a non-commercial one at that) has been a bit like trying to convince them that I'm a wizard or a mermaid. And while I understand the inclination to disbelieve in the things we are unfamiliar with, the inability to feel seen has made for an incredibly arduous journey as I seek out my place in a world that does not always take kindly to the whole of my existence.*

*So while some of our locals do view the arts as an opportunity, my life experiences have led me to value it more for its capacity to cultivate belonging. In my youth, I was largely unaware of the conflict between the dominant culture and my nebulous identity. I say with immense gratitude that I believe I was shielded from such extraneous suffering because I existed within the arts community—a place where I knew I always had a seat at the table.*

# FIVE ORGANIZATIONAL MODELS

Over the course of our interviews and conversations with community members in Imperial County, common themes started to emerge within five distinct "models" of art-making and arts engagement. Within each model there are notable similarities in the motivations, organizational structures, sources of support, and challenges faced. By contrast, the organizations that operate in different models rarely seem to intersect with each other (with the exception of nonprofits and community institutions, as discussed below). We got the impression that the models are largely disconnected from each other in the ecosystem – one model could flourish or wither without people working in other models taking much notice of it.

## ARTS IN COMMUNITY INSTITUTIONS

Some of the most robust infrastructure supporting the arts in Imperial County lies within institutions that aren't primarily dedicated to the arts, such as schools, churches, after school programs, and community festivals.

### SCHOOLS

While arts education in schools remains spotty in the Imperial Valley, it is a critical and sometimes the only means families have to engage in the arts. For several of the arts-engaged people we spoke to who grew up locally, the exposure they received to the arts in school was crucial to their development. Standout programs at some of the high schools, such as the band at Central High School and the Southwest Academy for the Visual and Performing Arts (SAVAPA) at Southwest High School are focal points in the arts infrastructure of the county. Indeed, the auditoriums at Southwest and Brawley High Schools are the premiere performance venues in the region (though Palmer Auditorium at Brawley High School has been "temporarily" closed for renovations for nearly a decade).



It was also noted, however, that the school programs aren't accessible to all. Not only is proximity/transportation an issue; some programs also require auditions. The dance program at SAVAPA, for instance, is quite competitive, and while the program itself is free for students, most who get in have previously taken private dance classes. In general, the music programs at secondary schools are considered quite strong, but other arts disciplines tend to be hit or miss. For instance, there's only one dance teacher for the seven high schools in the district. Coverage is even spottier at the county's elementary and middle schools, where arts programs are only available if a parent has the skills and motivation to create one.

Part of the challenge for the arts at local schools lies in the somewhat haphazard—and often inefficient—ways in which the programs are run. While there are statewide standards for the provision of arts education in public schools, the schools are often focused on meeting short-term minimum requirements rather than investing in developing robust arts programs over time. For instance, while musical instruments are supposed to be covered under the educational materials that public schools provide to students under the Williams case settlement, one interviewee observed that many schools purchase low-quality instruments that soon fall into disrepair and are no longer usable. Similarly, one school received a grant to install pottery kilns, but isn't offering pottery courses. According to some who work with local schools, administrators are primarily interested in checking a box and reporting that a certain number of students were served, rath-

er than fostering meaningful engagement with the arts. In some instances, students didn't even receive their completed art projects to take home with them and share with their families.

At least in some cases the lack of investment and value placed on the arts is also reflected in low student participation numbers. One interviewee recalled being one of just three students participating in orchestra in elementary school. Similarly, one of the high school drama clubs currently only has about ten members, only three of whom want to perform. Even at the community college, the orchestra is reportedly increasingly bringing in musicians from outside the Valley for concerts.

On some level this seems to be the result of the box-checking mentality about arts education, which fails to fully engage students in the work. As one teaching artist put it: "You can only do so much with paper plates and pipe cleaners." One active Mariachi musician we spoke with, who had participated in band and orchestra throughout his entire public school education in the Valley, recalled that his education was predominantly in classical music, with some popular or traditional American band songs. He wasn't exposed to other genres until he joined a Jazz band and started playing in church when he was 14 or 15.

While the schools play a critical role in creating opportunities to access the arts in Imperial County – for students as well as for parents and community members who experience their creative work – there is a perceived lack of investment and insufficient coverage.



## A VIEW FROM THE VALLEY

Though it's apparent that geographical differences heavily influence access to funding and the cultural environment around them, the institutions discussed in this section remain the backbone of communities across the county. This mode of art-making has deep connections to the unique populations they serve, and is the only mode of art-making that maintains a somewhat organized method of communicating with its constituents. High levels of trust and the official nature of these institutions gives them a fairly large degree of influence in establishing our attitude towards and experience with the arts. Schools, for instance, function in our community as geographical landmarks, sources of collective identity, and often a point of pride for various reasons.

When my hometown saw the unveiling of its very own Walmart, officials asked our junior high marching band to perform in all its awkward teenage glory. High school pep rallies typically took place at a small public stage at the center of town, and when the marching band and drumline would play, passerbys would show their support with a honk or a holler. Because schools are so central to each locale's social culture, being in the marching band definitely kept us involved in the broader community more than most.

While attending school in Brawley, I had median levels of access to arts in comparison to the rest of our county. Southwest High School was known for its dance and theatre, and Central High School for its music, though Calipatria High School lacked all three entirely. Arts programming in Brawley may not have been as robust as in other

cities, but I still had great experiences with what we did have. As a kid, I sang in choir, danced in a folklorico group, began my career as a band kid, and performed in the occasional talent show. While in high school, my involvement expanded to include things like graphic design, art, and theatre. With visibly low levels of support, theatre productions had an average audience of about 5-20 people made up of close relatives and students tasked with an assignment. Yet, the first and only production I performed in became a life-changing experience that led me to new institutions, social networks, and learning opportunities.

In Brawley specifically, there has long been a pervasive culture of placing priority on academics and athletics over the arts. When I took an aptitude test in middle school and received the results that I'd be best suited for a career as an interior designer, I was immediately told by the teacher that I should consider more practical options. Similarly, my younger sister scored well for creative writing and was given a familiar warning a few years later. In high school, I was able to take art very briefly, where by contrast I had a passionate teacher who encouraged my unique creative process and made the experience positively unforgettable. Knowing that these educators hold incredible power to sway students in this way, I question what I would've done had my middle school music teacher not have gifted me a clarinet of my own. Would I have auditioned to be drum major without him taking me under his wing? The saving grace for artists like myself has often been the teachers that value and invest in us as individuals.

In cooperation with educators, my high school marching band had a core group of supporters that reflected the intergenerational nature of the community at large. A handful of devoted parents also regularly volunteered their time and resources to support the band with food and drinks, transportation, manual labor, and more. Together, we were able to operate as a unit to produce something larger than ourselves. In a particularly memorable show of love, my high school music teacher managed to knit hats for every one of us 70+ students for Christmas one year. Unfortunately, this was the teacher who declined to be interviewed and preferred to remain at a distance from the community she once sacrificed so much for. A great many arts educators across the valley are known in their communities for giving their all to what they do, though it seems they may run an increased risk of burnout as a result.

Despite Brawley's music program lacking funding, support staff, and other resources, key people often came through just in time to make things happen. Brawley may not have had an accomplished dance team like Southwest, or a band as big and flashy as Central's,

but we showed up as we were and learned a little about a lot in the process—even if it wasn't all music related. There is something to be said about a place that kids can go to feel accepted and even celebrated for being authentically themselves. The band room became a second home for so many of us, and I learned at a young age that as long as I was a band kid, I knew where I belonged.

After listening to an interviewee speak about his own experiences in another part of the county, I realized that our schools relied almost exclusively on teaching European music and classical techniques. In fact, outside of jazz band, this genre was seen as the default. Admittedly, I too would have relished the opportunity to integrate my arts education with my cultural identity in the form of mariachi music or something similar. Had the curriculum involved more culturally diverse content, and perhaps featured pieces that spoke to our majority Latino student bodies, it's possible that this reifying approach could have increased student participation, cultural appreciation, and even self-esteem.



**AFTER SCHOOL PROGRAMS**

Another important avenue of access to the arts is through after school programs. This, of course, primarily caters to children, but also creates opportunities for the participants’ families to engage with art, and is a source of employment for teaching artists. The three main programs we heard about are After School Education and Safety (ASES), the Boys & Girls Club, and 4H.

ASES is funded by the Department of Education and provides free afterschool education and enrichment programs, including arts programs, for Kindergarten through 9th grade. The programs are offered through partnerships between the local schools and community-based organizations. At one of our site visits we were able to watch a dress rehearsal for the ASES dance group from a middle school in El Centro. Students in that program receive two hours of dance-based “enrich-

ment” per day and one hour of study support. ASES relies on local organizations and qualified individuals to offer arts programs, so the availability of arts programs is uneven across the county. One interviewee noted that there’s also an equity gap in the provision of after school arts programs: Families that can afford it are more likely to send their students to private dance, music, or art classes, rather than to ASES.

For many middle class families, the Boys and Girls Club plays an important role in providing childcare until working parents are able to pick up their children. The organization is a national nonprofit, but the local chapters must generate their own operating resources. Activities tend to be STEM-based (Science, Technology, Engineering, Mathematics), but there are also arts and physical activities. Local artists are sometimes engaged to offer arts programs.



The 4-H Youth Development Program is a program of the University of California Division of Agriculture and Natural Resources and administered by the University of California Cooperative Extension offices. Activities are organized through local clubs that are led by parents. The clubs attract families from a wider income range – including some families with higher income levels – than the other after school programs discussed above. Participants pay a modest annual fee, but must also pay for each project they participate in. Some families spend thousands of dollars on projects (most notably those whose projects consist of raising livestock for competitions). Project options include activities such as pottery, cooking, sewing, quilting, and woodworking, but the offerings depend on the availability of suitable adult project leaders. Kids often start their first project like woodworking with no prior skills and may take on progressively harder projects in an area as their skills develop. Based on the subjective impressions of some interviewees, it seems that 4H participants are mostly non-Hispanic.

**CHURCHES**

While none of our interviewees specifically mentioned religious organizations among the primary avenues through which people in Imperial County are exposed to or engage with the arts, it stands out to us that about half of the people we spoke with are in their church choirs or bands, and/or participated in church theatricals at some point in their lives. For some who went on to creative careers, the opportunity to practice and perform in church marked an important step in their creative development.

Many of the local congregations have expanded their musical accompaniment beyond a single pianist or organist and choir to include praise bands. While some churches recruit musicians from among their congregants and allow all to participate regardless of skill or experience, others pay their musicians. In several instances the musicians who are paid to play in church also play gigs and/or teach music lessons outside of church, and they can be an important point of contact between the general population and the “creative community.” For instance, interviewees mentioned approaching musicians in their churches when they were seeking recommendations for teachers for after school music programs.

Some local churches reportedly put on fairly elaborate productions and have microphones, PA systems, and other technical equipment that they occasionally lend out for other community events. Besides music, we heard that at least some churches stage theatrical performances with elaborate sets, costumes, fog machines, etc. One of the community members we spoke to is part of a congregation that holds artist showcases and open mic nights at local coffee shops and other venues around the county several times a year as part of their outreach. At that particular church, there is a deep belief in the power of merging art and spirituality, which, it is hoped, will lead to a flourishing of both as was seen during the renaissance.

## A VIEW FROM THE VALLEY

*Exposure to the arts while in church was a recurring theme we heard in many of our interviews, and one that I can relate to as well. My father was raised Catholic and my mother was raised Mormon, and because these ideologies were often at odds, my family spent several years sampling churches around the Valley. From Presbyterian to Baptist, Christian Science to Catholic, I noticed that each church showcased their talented musicians in different ways.*

*Overall, I spent most of my time attending the Mormon church which gave me access to creative opportunities like choir, swing dancing, and baking and sewing classes. The Mormon church itself had no shortage of pianos, pianists, or piano lessons, and though I never took advantage of any formal instruction, I made it a point to play the opening phrase of Fur Elise on every unattended*

*piano I saw. I even had my acting debut on church grounds when I performed as an extra in the annual Nativity play one year.*

*Though most people don't think of churches when they think of arts programming, often-times creativity is inextricable from the culture. At present, one of our local churches features a popular worship group that draws in hundreds of participants and viewers from around the Valley. By showcasing the power of live music and leveraging a strong social media presence, this church has become a place where creativity and community successfully converge. As someone who has spent a lot of time in churches, I've realized over time that these institutions don't resonate with me and my brand of creativity. Yet, I appreciate on a highly personal level the kind of exposure that it has afforded people from all walks of life, including myself.*

## CHAMBERS OF COMMERCE

Many of the most widely accessible arts events in Imperial County occur in the context of the region's long standing seasonal festivals and fairs. For instance, the weeklong schedule of events surrounding the Cattle Call Rodeo in Brawley—the largest annual event in Imperial Valley—has historically included an evening of cowboy poetry night and a Mariachi night. Other events, such as the Holtville Carrot Festival and the City of Imperial's "Christmas in a Small Town," showcase the work of local artists and craftspeople.

The festivals are generally organized by the local Chambers of Commerce, which means the Chambers of Commerce are among the largest art presenters in the county even though they may not think of themselves as such. The only festival that is specifically dedicated to the arts is the Mariachi Festival sin Fronteras in Calexico. Many of the festivals have been happening for decades in more-or-less the same fashion, and they play important roles in fostering community cohesion and local identities. Some signature events—including the Mariachi Festival in Calexico—were canceled in recent years, largely due to the pandemic. However, there has also been turmoil within several local Chambers of Commerce, resulting in some ceasing operations and merging into a regional chamber.

Beyond the Chambers of Commerce, individual local businesses are also an important source of funding for the arts. Sponsorships from local restaurants, construction companies, and other small businesses play a critical role in supporting a wide range of performances and events. What is interesting about these sponsorships and sets

them apart from other forms of arts support is that they don't seem to be tied to an assessment of the quality of the artistic work or even the reputation of the artists involved. Rather they are driven either by the size of the event (i.e., the amount of exposure the sponsor expects to get) or by personal connections. One interviewee noted that a community theater production directed by someone who had good connections within the business community was able to secure a budget of over \$13,000 for a single production, whereas the organization more typically operates on about \$5,000 all year. Another factor that influences the availability of sponsorships is simply the state of the local economy. As one community member stated, "When the businesses struggle, the arts struggle."

In many ways the community institutions discussed in this section—whether educational, religious, or business-oriented—provide critical infrastructure that supports the arts in Imperial County. This includes providing venues for performances, offering AV equipment and technical support for community events, and creating employment opportunities for artists. Taken together, arts that are embedded in community institutions appear to be the most robust mode of making and enjoying art in Imperial County, both in terms of continuity over time and the number of people reached. However, there's certainly still room for growth, and interviewees pointed out that within the various community institutions there have been ups and downs in the levels of support for the arts over the years, perhaps most notably at local public schools, but also in the churches, after school programs, and Chambers of Commerce.



We also heard of intergenerational tensions within some of the community institutions, revolving around the institutions' reluctance to change. One parent told us it took four years of hard work to build enough trust with the local school administrators to be able to offer more creative opportunities for students, including a sensory room for children on the autism spectrum. Another local arts leader (who declined to participate in an interview for this study) reportedly became

so frustrated with the unwillingness of schools to adopt any meaningful change that she left the arts field entirely and no longer wants to have anything to do with it. While the infrastructure provided through community institutions plays a significant role in supporting the arts field overall, it also appears to be tied to established interests and power dynamics within the county, and is often not as flexible as some younger artists and community leaders would like.

## A VIEW FROM THE VALLEY

*The Chambers of Commerce offer a reliable set of programming across the Valley and are generally regarded with great pride amongst locals. Annual festivals put on by the organizations run like clockwork, and feature many long standing traditions. The county fair that comes to Imperial every spring is also home to a whole host of arts and culture events. 4H groups around the Valley are invited to display their projects and artwork at several show spaces on site, with mediums ranging from photography and woodworking, to baking and quilting. The commotion from live music and dance performances fills the aisles between livestock barns and carnival rides, while some vendors sell handmade goods and other manufactured items to round out the fairtime experience. During the pandemic, the community felt empty without these and other highly anticipated events that we had grown accustomed to. There was a lot of excitement and energy about bringing these kinds of events back, but even as festivals have slowly returned, they don't seem to deliver as strongly as they have in years*

*past. Cattle Call, for example, typically features dancers, live music, marching bands, float-making, and window painting. While much of the old fanfare has been successfully revitalized, good natured rivalries between schools and towns in the region seem to have given way to more serious divides, with more overt political and ideological messaging. Most of the school marching bands from the region no longer participate due to harassment by rival groups. Some of this was already happening prior to the pandemic, but the political polarization, identity politics, and an ongoing global health crisis seem to have exacerbated the situation. One of the things I was happy to see, however, was the continued support of the community from within. Despite there being some rifts in our cross-cultural rapport post-pandemic, sponsorship of our own remains strong. This seems to indicate that to some measurable degree, the community continues to believe in itself despite our differences.*

## NONPROFITS

Through our interviews and conversations in Imperial County, we learned about a handful of nonprofit organizations that are specifically committed to the arts. Most of these—for instance, Imperial Valley Symphony, Imperial Valley Choral Society, and Mostly Theatre Company—recruit local talent to produce music and theater performances. In doing so, they create opportunities both for performers and audiences. Mostly Theatre also offers summer camps for children and teens.

The North County Coalition for the Arts (NoCCA) has historically functioned in a similar manner, as a community theater focused on musicals, but its mission is to support the arts more broadly. In the past the organization has also brought touring professional dance, theater, opera, and music groups to perform at Palmer Auditorium (at Brawley High School). NoCCA also currently serves as the Imperial County Arts Council, meaning that the County Board of Supervisors has designated it as the local partner for the California Arts Council, and it provides scholarships to graduating seniors who are planning to study the arts at college.

The oldest cultural organization in the region is the Hidalgo Society, founded in 1922, and it is the only local cultural organization that has its own hall for performances and events. The Hidalgo Society is committed to celebrating and preserving the region’s Mexican Heritage but also provides leadership and supports the Mexican American community more generally.

All of these nonprofits are run by volunteers. If there are any compensated staff members, they receive modest stipends rather than full- or even

part-time salaries. Based on the available IRS data, the Hidalgo Society has the largest annual budget, topping \$200,000 in some years, while the other organizations mentioned above fall well below \$100,000.

In addition to the arts-focussed organizations, there are two museums in the county that have paid staff. The museums provide some cultural exhibits and/or artistic programming, but one is primarily a history museum and the other a museum of natural history.<sup>4</sup>

All of the nonprofit organizations discussed here are well-established and have histories going back multiple decades. Several of them have strong ties to other community institutions and are able to benefit from the existing infrastructure. For instance, the Choral Society’s Master Chorale is offered through a non-credit course at Imperial Valley College, and rehearsals are held at the college. Meanwhile, the Music Director of the Imperial Valley Symphony is employed as the Director of Orchestras at Southwest High School, and performances are held in the high school’s auditorium. Finally, Mostly Theatre’s summer camp and performances are held at a Catholic school in El Centro. While these organizations have proven to be resilient over the decades, several of them have experienced ups and downs over the years, often in conjunction with changing leadership. Relying on volunteer labor is challenging, and in particular, it was noted that expertise in areas such as grant writing are often lacking in these organizations.

<sup>4</sup> The Film Commission, Calexico Arts Council, and East Jesus outdoor art museum are formally also incorporated as nonprofits, but are discussed in later sections of this report.

## A VIEW FROM THE VALLEY

*Much of my involvement with arts nonprofits has been facilitated indirectly, either through school affiliations or as a means of supporting friends. Even if few and far between, I cherish the unlikely instances of exposure that some of our community’s most enduring nonprofits have brought to my backyard. I still remember getting off the bus at Palmer Auditorium for a field trip in 2nd grade. We marched past a row of trailers wrapped in large scale photographs of professional dancers and it felt as if I was a world away from school and not just a 3-minute bus ride north. That day, I witnessed a traveling tour of the Nutcracker ballet that blew my little mind.*

*It wasn’t until recently that I learned this experience was actually a product of NoCCA’s hard work, and as it turned out, we were interviewing the man who made that memorable performance possible. However brief and infrequent these interactions may be, often it is these first instances of exposure that make the greatest impact on one’s artistic psyche. The first time I saw my artwork on false walls for public display, for example, was at a school-sanctioned exhibition held at Hidalgo Hall. Similarly, I recall attending an “Around the World” tasting event hosted by one of our local museums, and to this day, I must credit this encounter in part for sparking my life-long passion for the culinary arts.*

*While the longevity of our nonprofits is commendable, I would say that levels of participation, public awareness, and accessibility may not reflect their successes in*

*other realms. Some of my theatre friends in the past have cited lapses in leadership as a contributor to lackluster participation and production. However, a good friend of mine who identifies as a queer woman of color has had great things to say about the sense of community organizations like Mostly Theatre Company (MTC) have provided her. She’s shared with me that the lack of qualified personnel and insufficient funding is probably what prompts smaller nonprofits to invest in those who are less experienced, but willing to learn.*

*This level of risk-taking contrasts her impression of more well-funded nonprofit theatre groups. She feels that opportunities in these larger organizations are more likely to be given to those with existing connections rather than to newcomers. This raises the question whether the community-first culture of MTC is the result of it lacking the conventional power structures that tend to exist within more financially formidable entities. Would we see a shift towards a more exclusive, competition-based environment if the organization was given better funding? Despite the impression that our nonprofit sector may exist as somewhat of a closed loop, what programming does reach the broader community has proven to be far too potent to be overlooked. Here in the Imperial Valley, there is definitely the sense that such experiences — no matter how small — can’t be taken for granted.*

## ARTS BUSINESSES

Given the scarce opportunities for employment, paid performances, and philanthropic support, most artists who support themselves through their creative work in Imperial County do so by creating their own businesses. During our phone interviews and conversations onsite, we heard of three or four private dance studios, some photography studios, at least two art studios that offer private classes, and a music store that also offers lessons and repairs instruments. There are also two movie theaters, one belonging to the national CineMark chain, and the other owned by a small California-based movie theater operator.

One interviewee noted that there’s a ceiling to the level of professionalism one can reach making and marketing one’s own art in Imperial Valley, so many of the local arts businesses branch into teaching. In some cases that means offering classes in their private studios, and in others going into schools or afterschool programs on a contract basis (or both). While the private studios teach students of all ages and skill levels, they are unique in the local arts ecosystem in that they provide the only opportunities for students to study their art form at a more advanced level and to explore genres and/or media that are not included in general art or music courses at schools or afterschool programs.

Although arts businesses are only a small segment of the local arts ecosystem, our conversations with business owners suggest that this mode of art making is quite resilient, even if opportunities for growth are limited. Some of the local arts businesses have been in operation for decades. One business owner pointed out that in some ways the local arts businesses have

been the bedrock of the arts in Imperial County, as nonprofits and opportunities to pursue the arts in schools and other community institutions have ebbed and flowed with the availability of funding over the years. The business owners “have skin in the game,” as an interviewee put it—they have a financial interest in keeping the arts in Imperial County. It should be noted, however, that while the business owners we spoke to have been successful and endured over the years, there are many others who haven’t. Particularly after two years of Covid-related challenges, only the strongest arts businesses still remain.

According to our interviews, the arts business owners are well connected with each other in Imperial County and frequently refer clients to each other. One interviewee noted that there used to be an informal network of independent music stores in Southern California that was extremely helpful in creating opportunities to discuss challenges in the industry, learn from each other, and collaborate on bulk orders to reduce shipping costs, but that type of industry specific regional network appears to be rare. It was also noted that since most arts business owners come from an arts background rather than from business, they don’t have the skills—and often lack financial resources—to promote their businesses effectively. Though our research only gives us a very limited glimpse of the arts businesses of Imperial County, commonalities in the socio-economic and educational background of the arts business owners we met also suggests that the financial resources needed to start a business, and the risk tolerance required for such an undertaking, may limit the segment of artists to whom this avenue is available.

## A VIEW FROM THE VALLEY

*The arts businesses of both past and present have had a significant impact on the culture of the Imperial Valley, with some featuring prominently in our community’s collective memory. A woman who runs a popular fine art studio in Brawley, for example, is well known for having taught entire troupes of siblings and even the children of her former students. This type of embedded influence is also evident in the products and custom apparel produced by some of our graphic design businesses. These entities have had a hand in shaping the aesthetic of the Valley by creating the shirts, banners, and logos for annual festivals and events countywide. Perhaps unintentionally, these iconic designs constitute much of the art our community has made about itself. That many of these highly anticipated annual de-*

*signs become collector’s items, and because our arts businesses are often called upon in various ways to ‘speak’ for the community at large, it is implied that what these artists create is as much about making the sale as it is about representing who we are.*

*As time has gone by, I’ve witnessed many arts businesses have to close their doors. Amongst the casualties are dance studios, sewing shops, music supply stores, and a lone drive-in movie theater. The emergence of corporate chains like Michael’s and Walmart solidified this trend early on, while the advent of online shopping and streaming in recent years has further complicated the terrain. Generally speaking, I find there isn’t a lot of overlap between the local arts businesses which results in a relatively*



*non-competitive environment that nurtures strong bonds between business owners. These kinds of mutually beneficial relationships have proven to be the difference between sink or swim for many as we continue to weather the storm.*

*I agree with the finding that many arts business owners are artists first and businesspeople second. Often, I think this occurs out of financial necessity or unwavering ambition. As the daughter of a self-taught business woman myself, I have been privy to the struggles and rewards of operating a creative business in our county. I learned from my mother that when building a business from the ground up, YouTube can get you pretty far, but that it's usually a workshop that seals the deal. Over the course of her 10+ years in the photography business, she's attended conferences and expos as far as San Diego, Las Vegas, and Nashville in order to learn from seasoned professionals in her field and implement the industry's latest software and equipment. Because the technical needs of a volume photog-*

*raphy business implicate a high barrier to entry, I wonder if factors of wealth, race, and gender might have deterred my mother from the venture if it weren't for my father working a job in the utilities that provided our family the financial stability necessary to proceed in spite of them.*

*The photography community overall is quick to exchange knowledge, I find, unless you're in business to make a profit. As one of the more saturated markets in the Valley, competition between 'side-gig' photographers and 'professional' photographers often forces these artists to operate and attempt to grow in isolation. Tensions do occasionally arise as a result of conflict over territories and clientele, but outside of business matters most photographers remain amicable. In speaking to my mother about her experience as a minority business owner, she expressed a serious need for dedicated support groups, workshops, and networks that uplift and sustain women in business specifically.*

## LIVE MUSIC

Commercial live music operates slightly differently than the arts businesses described above. While music venues, DJs, and bands seek to generate income just like any other small business, they generally aren't set up to sustain full time careers in Imperial Valley. Most of the venues that present live music are restaurants, cafes, or bars. Owners and managers may enjoy supporting the local artists and take pride in their contribution to the local cultural scene, but their business models depend on food and beverage sales—the music, karaoke, open mic nights, and other types of performances primarily serve to bring in customers. Area residents have seen a lot of turnover among hospitality businesses with live entertainment as the Main Streets in the region's towns have struggled throughout the Great Recession and the Covid pandemic. To our knowledge, there are no concert venues in Imperial County that primarily sustain themselves through ticket sales.

The musicians and DJs in the region generate their income through gigs at bars and restaurants, festivals, and private parties. According to our interviews, even the performers who are most in demand—some of whom average two

to five gigs per weekend—are unable to sustain themselves through their performances. All of the musicians we heard of work at least part-time in a non-arts job to supplement their income. The few musicians from Imperial County who have gone on to pursue their music full time have left the Valley. For many local bands, whatever fees they earn from their performances at best help to offset the expenses of pursuing their musical passion.

Several of the most successful local bands are Mariachis, of which there are currently four in Imperial County. They mostly perform at private events such as birthday parties, anniversaries, weddings, and funerals. Unlike some bands in the region that are primarily passion projects, the Mariachis are managed in a very business-oriented manner, with set rates based on the length of the engagement and number of musicians performing. The relationship between the Mariachi bands is generally amicable. Some musicians perform with several of the local Mariachis, and if one band member isn't available for an event, it's not uncommon to hire a musician from a rival outfit to fill in for the day. The repertoires are similar, and the bands generally try not to undercut each other's rates.







Interestingly, none of the six Mariachi musicians we spoke with grew up with a strong connection to the genre. For most, it was the music that their parents listened to in the background while they were growing up, and, as such, feels somewhat nostalgic. Some came from musical families, while others were introduced to music through school or church and only started playing Mariachi in their teens, when they began to play gigs. One musician we spoke with pointed out that there weren't any opportunities to learn Mariachi music when he was growing up in Imperial County, so when he joined a Mariachi band they hired a teacher to come over from Mexicali to teach them new songs.

There is a Mariachi club at one of the high schools now, but the teachers at the schools have no background in the genre. In order to receive any formal training in the Mariachi style one must leave the county. One of our interviewees completed a Mariachi degree program at Southwestern College in Chula Vista (San Diego County). For most local musicians that isn't an option, but they would welcome the opportunity to take master classes from professional Mariachis if they were available locally. Some local Mariachis would also like to see the school clubs turn into curricular classes, as well as courses at Imperial Valley College. That might allow local musicians to sustain themselves full time through a combination of teaching and performing, and allow the art form to flourish.

## A VIEW FROM THE VALLEY

*It's true in my experience that local artists of all types refer to their art as a 'side gig', with the exception of arts teachers typically in a school setting. Even then, music teachers often lead with the title of teacher rather than artist. Nonetheless, it was a bit surprising to me to find that even the busiest musicians could not sustain themselves on performance earnings alone. In addition to the prominent role of Mariachis, I would also say that DJs are continually high in demand due to flexibility within their genre.*

*As an event photographer, I've found myself working alongside one particular DJ who dominates his niche by almost exclusively spinning country classics and 80s pop. Other DJs may set themselves apart by leaning into their brand of emceeing, be that in English, Spanish, or a mix of both. That our community lacks any dedicated concert venue is perhaps what makes the instant atmosphere that comes with hiring a DJ so appealing. Sadly, without a venue, those who cannot afford to leave the Valley may never encounter live music at stadiums, symphony halls, jazz clubs and the like.*

*Devoid of the necessary infrastructure to otherwise support these artists, I would emphasize that our live music scene is almost entirely dependent on the success of our restaurants.*

*As a whole, live music in the Imperial Valley has had a wonderful way of mirroring our community's cultural progression. Because economic enmeshment directly influences our musicians, what venues are available often dictate what genres are performed. For example, in the early 2010s, a popular venue for local live music was a Christian-based cafe on Main Street in Brawley. This sit-down coffee shop was incredibly well-received and openly expressed solidarity with the dominant culture, displaying military flags and vinyl bible verses for ambiance. On most open mic nights, a solo flautist, jazz trio, or acoustic guitarist might grace the stage.*

*Now, in the early 2020s, I would say the venue currently on my radar is a modern collaborative concept in downtown El Centro. Occupying a spacious warehouse situated amongst the structural decay of economic devastation, it quite literally sets the stage for an underground community of artists and live musicians that, frankly, I have not seen here before. This graffiti art laden venue is becoming increasingly known for hosting well-attended events that spotlight the community's punk rock, indie fusion, and rap musicians who frequently perform late into the night. That this type of creative space exists at all illustrates a shift in culture, while the push-back from others in the community highlights ongoing intergenerational tensions.*

## SOCIAL ENTERPRISES

To begin this section, we want to emphasize that we’re using the term “Social Enterprises” loosely. Strictly speaking, a “Social Enterprise” is a for-profit business that also serves a social purpose. That definition applies to some of the organizations we discuss here, but not all of them. Some are nonprofits, and some are loosely organized collectives without any formal corporate structure.

What the organizations we’re referring to as Social Enterprises have in common is that, while they’re committed to engaging people in the arts, the emphasis is on the people more than the arts. In our understanding, these organizations are trying to create new opportunities for creative expression and exploration particularly (but not only) for young people and emerging artists. The ways in which those people choose to express themselves—whether in fashion design, painting, media production, dance, poetry, or some other form—is somewhat flexible. As one local organizer put it, “I help artists do whatever they want to do. I always say, ‘Your dream is my dream.’” The environment created is not one of teachers and students, but rather of holding space and encouraging participants to explore on their own. The focus is on participation and creation, rather than on a final product or performance.

Many of the people we spoke to who are creating Social Enterprises felt there was no place for them to go, be themselves, and express themselves when they were growing up in Imperial Valley. One interviewee explained, “When I was a

kid I was very artistic. I wasn’t academic. Kids like me were punished, instead of trying to empower those gifts.” Another shared the experience of seeing the creative people they grew up with being reprimanded if they sought to do anything other than follow the narrow career pathways that their families and the community around them expected of them. For many growing up in the Valley, the extent of those expectations is limited to landing a secure job at one of the two state prisons in the region or working for the influential Irrigation District – options that are considered a step up from working in agriculture, retail, or the service industries. In the experience of the Social Entrepreneurs we spoke with, young people in the Valley generally aren’t encouraged to aspire to anything else or to explore other opportunities. To rectify that, the Social Enterprises seek to lift up the next generation and not only teach them how to follow in their footsteps, but allow them to exceed what is currently possible.

The ways in which they do that varies. In one example, a for-profit business aims to train young people to use its media production, graphic design, and apparel printing equipment through internships, and allows alumni of their training program to use the equipment for their own creative projects or business ventures. Separately, a loosely organized collective of artists is seeking to create new opportunities through networking, sharing resources, and collaborating on projects.

A third organization took as its starting point the lack of opportunities in the community for children with special needs, and responded by



creating programs around the children’s desire to express themselves and grow through dance, music, and art. Not limited to arts (there are also programs in areas such as sports and gardening), this organization has created new opportunities that are inclusive and accessible to children of all ability levels. Through dance and music classes that draw on a range of genres and cultural traditions, code switching between cultural frames, and adapting to communication abilities and skills, non-verbal kids become more communicative, and children of all ability levels become more self-confident and accepting of their differences.

One thing that all of the Social Enterprises we encountered have in common is that their founders decided to create a new organization, essentially from scratch. In part, this seems to be motivated by the rigidity that the founders experienced in the existing nonprofits and community institutions in the region, and tensions that arose due to generational and cultural differences with established interest groups in those organizations. One interviewee noted that the younger generation doesn’t want to operate within existing institutions, which tend to be dominated by older community members. Echoing the language of a generational shift, another interviewee said, “We’re trying to start the spark in people. That’s the focus of my generation.”

While the Social Enterprises are very much community oriented, they don’t seem to have broad-based support from the community – at least not yet. Based on our conversations, it seems most of these enterprises are led by committed individuals or small teams. We didn’t get the sense that they have large numbers of volunteers or

financial supporters in the community. In fact, it’s unclear whether the community at large is even aware of some of them (which in some instances may be intentional, since they operate out of unmarked buildings).

At least two of the entrepreneurs who started for-profit businesses seem to have funded the enterprise almost entirely on their own. One used the prize money he had won through a design competition to start his business; another used a small grant for individual artists that she received from NoCCA to pay the security deposit for her studio space. While some Social Enterprises are structured as nonprofits, none of the founders we spoke to described their initiatives as charity work. Rather, they see their work as investing in the community, in the next generation, and, in some cases, perhaps also in themselves. Some also seek to give back to the community, in acknowledgement of the people who enabled them to get to where they are.

Nearly all of the Social Enterprises we learned of were founded in the last three or four years, and their long-term sustainability is far from clear. Where founders decided to incorporate as for-profit businesses the community programs sometimes aren’t yet fully realized, since their focus has been on ensuring the sustainability of the business that is expected to pay for their more altruistic ambitions. One challenge they face is that the work that their creative businesses produce—whether streetwear, paintings, alternative rock music, or tattoo designs—don’t cater to the aesthetic preferences of the residents in Imperial County who have disposable income to spend on art. One non-Hispanic interviewee commented that people like him are unlikely to find anything

to spend their money on if they go to an art walk in Imperial County and most of the work draws on Mexican cultural traditions and imagery. A younger Latina interviewee with very noticeable tattoos shared that she believes many of the more traditional community members (both Latina/o/x and non-Hispanic) actually feel threatened by the work she produces and the way she looks.

Another feature that stands out about the Social Enterprises in Imperial County is that the sector seems highly fragmented. Even if the the founders know of each other, they aren’t in close contact or aware of the current events and programs that others are offering. Each of the founders we spoke to seems to feel like they’re starting something from scratch, without precedent in the Valley. Asked about this lack of awareness, one interviewee noted that many of the Social Enterprises are focused on managing the day-to-day operations of their businesses and programs and lack resources and expertise to promote themselves externally. This individual also sees the lack of coordination between these initiatives as an impediment to effectively advocating and securing support for the creative enterprises at the municipal and county levels.

## A VIEW FROM THE VALLEY

*For me, this mode of art-making is currently the most exciting and inspiring. This may be the result of similarities on the basis of age (mid-20s to late-30s) and cultural heritage (Hispanic or Latina/o/x) that make them particularly relatable to me. Additionally, each of the social entrepreneurs discussed in this section maintains the shared belief that they are personally tasked with remedying the systemic inequities closest to them. It is evident that these organizers have listened to the specific needs of their community and have done away with the limitations of pre-existing models. They have created spaces that both use the arts to encourage personal development and vice versa.*

*The organizations discussed in this section occupy a space I never could have dreamed up for the Valley, and it gives me hope to see that there are others still willing to invest in the creativity of the region. What I like most about these budding social enterprises is that they have the potential to provide new employment opportunities while serving as a creative starting point for historically overlooked minorities. The genius of these enterprises lies in recognizing that an investment in art and creativity is an investment in the community and in oneself.*

## OUTSIDER ART

On an abandoned military base at the remote northern end of Imperial County lies “Slab City,” a community of squatters and transients that prides itself in being “the last free place” on account of its lack of formal governance. On their way into the unincorporated area, visitors are greeted by the brightly colored hillside of Salvation Mountain, a monumental work of religious devotion built by folk artist Leonard Knight over the course of thirty years until his death in 2014. Those who venture further arrive at East Jesus, an ever-evolving temporal outdoor art installation made from salvaged materials. The organization encourages free expression, inviting artists in residence to create work on site and engaging visitors in collaborative creation processes.

While it has some things in common with the Social Enterprises discussed above (e.g. its bypassing of established institutional structures and its focus on artistic creation rather than finished products), East Jesus wasn’t founded by a locally raised millennial who wants to support the local community. Instead, it was founded by a former tech worker who gave up his career and moved to the Imperial Valley to start an artistic experiment of sorts. Rather than addressing concerns

of Imperial County’s residents, East Jesus set out to create its own community.

Though it’s registered as a 501(c)(3) and the only art museum in Imperial County that is an accredited member of the California Museum Association, East Jesus seems to exist largely in a subsistence economy based on small donations from visitors, salvaging materials, and reducing waste.

Another artist-run community exists at Bombay Beach, along the shore of the Salton Sea. It started as an annual art festival but has shifted to year round community-engaged programming and permanent art installations. Interestingly, most of the statewide and national media coverage of the arts in Imperial County focusses on East Jesus and Bombay Beach, which are largely disconnected from mainstream society in Imperial County. While East Jesus attracts some visitors, particularly young people, from Imperial County, it’s not a place that many families would take their children to expose them to the arts. Most residents don’t seem to think of East Jesus or Bombay Beach as economic or cultural assets, though they certainly create opportunities for a certain fringe.



## A VIEW FROM THE VALLEY

*I believe Salvation Mountain is generally the initial draw to the area and attracts crowds of Valley locals, indie filmmakers, and annual volunteers, only some of whom are inclined to venture beyond. Despite the fact that those living in Slab City ultimately seek to escape mainstream society, most are friendly to outsiders and some even attempt to barter by offering handmade items for various possessions. In addition to the art sites mentioned above, residents of Slab City have built a stage called The Range where concerts and open mic events frequently take place. Those in charge of the venue seem to be volunteering their time, though there is a Patreon established to accept donations. Events are open to the public and are usually promoted via Facebook. However, due to its remote location, Slab City is primarily sought out by tourists and just a small portion of Imperial Valley residents visit.*

*Though Slab City and its surrounding attractions might not fit into neatly defined categories, even for the purposes of this report, the core value of actively participating in an intentional community seems to unite them all. In some ways, I would venture to say that Slab City itself is an expansive art installation in its own right.*

# REFLECTIONS ON CULTURAL POLICY

One of the most notable overarching characteristics of Imperial County’s cultural ecosystem lies in its proximity to the Mexican border. 85% of the population identifies as Latina/o/x, and, according to our interviews and conversations in the region, many of those people have ties to family members on the other side of the border. Residents of Imperial County, particularly those in Calexico, which is located right along the border, take advantage of cultural opportunities in the larger city of Mexicali on the opposite side. According to our interviewees, Mexicali has a vibrant arts scene with museums, music events, strong university arts departments, public art, and nightlife. Thousands of people cross the border every day for work or school, and people from Imperial County take advantage of opportunities in Mexicali including art classes for children at the state-funded Centro Estatal de las Artes and the Instituto de Bellas Artes des Estado de Baja California. We also heard of artists from Mexicali crossing into the US to offer classes in art forms such as Ballet Folklorico and Mariachi. With a population close to 700,000, Mexicali has more than three times as many inhabitants as all of Imperial County, and in Mexico the government plays a much more active role in supporting arts and culture than in the US. In fact, residents of Imperial County not only take advantage of government-sponsored arts opportunities in Mexico, but Mexican cultural policy also extends to the US side of the border through the Mexican

Consulate in Calexico. For a while the Consulate supported classes and other programs at the Old Post Office in El Centro, though its support was largely nominal and lacked substance, according to one individual involved.

On the US side, government support for the arts is far more limited, and varies substantially across Imperial County. According to grant data assembled by the National Assembly of State Arts Agencies,<sup>1</sup> the National Endowment for the Arts didn’t make any grants to organizations in Imperial County between FY 2018 and 2020, and the California Arts Council awarded grants to just three entities in that time period: NoCCA, the Imperial Valley Desert Museum, and the City of El Centro. The total funds provided by CAC in that three-year period amounted to \$56,000, of which \$40,000 went to NoCCA (the state agency’s local partner) as operating support. Other than designating NoCCA as the county’s “State Local Partner,” the County Board of Supervisors’s main points of engagement with the arts ecosystem are through the Office of Education<sup>2</sup> and the County Film Commission. The Film Commission

<sup>1</sup> National Assembly of State Arts Agencies, An Analysis of Equity in Nonprofit Arts Funding in California, 2022 [arts.ca.gov.]

<sup>2</sup> The important role that the schools play in providing access to the arts is discussed in the section on Community Institutions above.





is formally structured as a non-profit, which is contracted by the County Supervisors to handle permitting for film productions that shoot locally, and mediate between the producers and different government agencies in the region. Since 2012, the Film Commission has also been presenting an annual film festival at locations across the county.

Among the cities in Imperial County, Calexico is said to have the most vibrant arts scene and the most supportive cultural policies. Calexico was described in interviews as a hotspot for the arts within the county, with particular mention of the publicly supported Carmen Durazo Cultural Arts Center, outdoor music events, arts walks, and art projects along the border fence that occasionally draw national attention. Calexico is the only city in the region that has a cultural center that is open to the public and offers free and low-cost programs. The city provides access to the

building, a part time staff position for a program assistant at the center, and a minimal budget for programming (less than \$2,000 for the year). Most of the programming at the arts center is made possible by an independent nonprofit called the Calexico Arts Council, the primary purpose of which is to raise funds to support the Cultural Arts Center.

Except for the signature festivals that each community in Imperial County holds on an annual basis (described above), most other municipalities across the county have allocated no resources to support cultural activities. Some cities even seem hostile to artist-led initiatives. According to our interviews, smaller towns such as Heber and Calipatria have no resources, and, one suspects, little interest in supporting artistic initiatives or cultural participation. Other cities, such as El Centro and Imperial have more resources, but are very tradition-oriented and reluctant to change.

From the perspective of the artists and leaders in the cultural community that we spoke to, the city managers (perhaps even more than the elected members of the municipal councils) have actively opposed artistic initiatives. To illustrate this point, one interviewee shared that the city threatened to erase a mural she had helped to install on the side of a privately owned building because it touched the sidewalk, which is municipal property. To avoid seeing the mural wiped out entirely, the artists had to paint over a strip along the bottom of the mural to avoid coming into contact with the sidewalk. While several of our interviewees noted the difficulty of working with local officials in implementing projects, a lot seems to hinge on personal relationships. One step towards creating a more supportive environment for artists and other creatives, it was suggested, might therefore lie in facilitating better communications between the artist community and those in positions of power with support from people who are able to operate effectively in both environments.

# CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

This investigation of the arts ecosystem in Imperial County is part of a larger Field Scan commissioned by the California Arts Council, which includes similar qualitative explorations of two other communities – South Los Angeles and Fresno – as well as a statistical overview of the non-commercial arts sector in California. Overarching findings from the Field Scan were presented during the Arts Council’s public meeting on August 18, 2022. The reports resulting from this work are available on CAC’s website [arts.ca.gov].

It is, of course, impossible to capture the full diversity of cultural expressions and artistic practices of a state as large and diverse as California in any single research report. Even within a relatively small and well-defined arts ecosystem such as

Imperial County, our research can only highlight a few examples of how local artists are working, how they engage with their communities, what makes their work possible, and the challenges they face. There are undoubtedly many more artists in Imperial County whose stories are yet to be told.

Nonetheless, we hope the few examples from Imperial County that we’ve shared here illustrate the value of looking beyond the cultural hubs and formal arts institutions when considering the important ways in which the arts enrich California’s diverse communities, how California’s diverse communities enrich the arts, and how that work can be deepened and strengthened.



# APPENDIX

## IMAGE CREDITS

Page 2 – Mural by “BOMS\_theartist” in Downtown El Centro.

Page 7 – Giant Purple Cactus, by Neal Lucas Hitch, at the Imperial Valley Desert Museum in Ocotillo, CA.

Page 9 – Children rehearsing a dance routine. Photo courtesy of Best S.T.E.P Forward.

Page 11 – Folklorico dancers at the Carmen Durazo Cultural Arts Center in Calixico, CA. Photo courtesy of the Carmen Durazo Cultural Arts Center.

Page 13 – Dancers posing for a group photo after the dress rehearsal for the Winter Dance Concert in the Jimmy Cannon Theater for the Performing Arts at Southwest High School in El Centro, CA.

Page 17 – Summer “Art for Kids” class at the Carmen Durazo Cultural Arts Center in Calixico, CA. Photo courtesy of the Carmen Durazo Cultural Arts Center.

Page 19 – Exterior of the Brawley Theatre, which has been closed since 1979 and is currently being renovated.

Page 19 – Children at the Cattle Call Parade in Brawley, CA. Photo courtesy of Best S.T.E.P Forward.

Page 24 – Families at the Cattle Call Parade in Brawley, CA. Photo courtesy of Best S.T.E.P Forward.

Page 29 – Art Studio at The Den in downtown El Centro, CA.

Page 31 – Dress rehearsal for the Winter Dance Concert at Southwest High School, El Centro, CA.

Page 32 – Mariachi Aurora de Calexico after a “Mariachi Dance & Dinner” event at the Calipatria Latin American Club fundraiser in Calipatria, CA. Pictured LEFT to RIGHT: Brittney Moncada, Wesley Mason, Roman Flores, Director Yvonne Angulo, Singer Edgar Moreno, Uriel Trevino, Joél Hernandez, Elias Ocegueda. Photo courtesy of Roman Flores.

Page 35 – Children in the gardens at Best S.T.E.P Forward in Calipatria, CA. Photo courtesy of Best S.T.E.P Forward.

Page 38 – Salvation Mountain, created by Leonard Knight between the 1980s and 2014 in Slab City, CA.

Page 39 – Entrance to East Jesus, the only art museum in Imperial County that is an accredited member of the California Museum Association, located in Slab City, CA.

Page 41 – Nosotros Park (2015), mural by Galeria Fronteriza (Eduardo Kintero, Pablo Castañeda, and Aaron Kintero) on Kloke Rd., Calexico CA. Photo courtesy of Eduardo Kintero.

Page 42 – The Old Guardian (2018), mural by Eduardo Kintero, at Cesar Chavez Boulevard and Second St., Calexico CA. Photo courtesy of the artist.

Page 44 – Santiago’s Bench (2021), by Eduardo Kintero at the Cathedral City Library, CA. Photo courtesy of the artist.

