



## Submerged

Jack Bilan

This piece was created after I traveled to the border between Mexico and the United States and heard stories from migrants who had traveled to El Paso for safety or a better life for their families. One central theme I took away from these stories was how vital water was to people's success crossing the border or even traveling from South and Central America to the United States. Humans cannot sustain life without water, yet rivers and oceans can be the same things that destroy our lives. They separate us from our loved ones and keep us from sanctuary. The contents of a water bottle that once flowed through the Rio Grande are made of the same water that penetrates the lungs of people crossing borders in search of safety for themselves and their children. I used a mix of surrealist imagery along with a picture of a father and son crossing the Rio Grande together to create an image that spoke to both life and death. The use of cherubs represents life, pouring drinking water into the river, while an ominous figure in the river represents death. In the background, I added the motif of the Emerald City from *The Wizard of Oz* to represent the United States-- a place painted to be full of new opportunities but, in reality, does not hold what people are genuinely looking for. The water bottle's label represents something manufactured in the United States: what is slowly killing you and what you need to survive.

As an artist, I like to become inspired to create my work by listening to music, hearing people's stories, and appreciating other creators' art pieces. As someone born and raised in Albuquerque, I find this piece inspired by the many murals downtown and across the city. I wanted to give my piece the same bright, colorful appeal while sending a strong message to the viewer. Albuquerque has a vibrant bilingual culture, and I wanted to ensure both quotes on my door represented the piece's message. This piece was created with acrylic paints, which are always simple, as I usually paint with oils instead. In all my acrylic paintings, I like to build up many thin layers of paint to give the pieces a more three-dimensional appearance, similar to how many artists use oil paints.

Creating this piece was a journey filled with challenges and rewards. I aimed to weave a compelling narrative through abstract elements, requiring careful balance and thoughtful composition. I wanted to create a piece that could be appreciated for its narrative depth and artistic merit. The process was a joy, and I hope this door opens a future for more artists to share their unique stories and perspectives.