

From recycling to a gallery! Tec Hidalgo students exhibit in the U.S.



The binational exhibition Trash Transformed, in the Winfisky Gallery, features artwork created from waste materials by students from the Tec and Salem State 23/04/2025

COURTESY OF THE INTERVIEWEES

Artwork created by students in the **Creative Studies** program at [Tecnológico de Monterrey's Hidalgo campus](#) and **Salem State University** was exhibited at the **Winfisky Gallery** in **Massachusetts** as part of the binational project **Trash to Art**.

The exhibition was displayed from **March 31 to April 18** as part of the **Earth Day** activities in **Salem, Massachusetts**. These pieces were made from **recycled and waste materials** to **promote sustainability** and **environmental awareness** through **art**.

Trash to Art is a **Collaborative Online International Learning** (COIL) project developed by students from both institutions, under the direction of professors **Francisco González**, from the **Tec's Hidalgo campus**, and **Tereza Swanda**, from

Salem State University.

For several weeks, participants worked in **binational teams** to create **artwork using reused materials**, merging ideas from different **cultural contexts** and reflecting on the **impact of consumption**.

"Art has no borders. It can connect people from different cultures and evoke emotions without the need to speak the same language," said **Fernanda Torres**, a **second-semester** Communication **student** at the **Tec**.



Visitors toured the Trash Transformed exhibition at the Winfisky Gallery, which features works created by students from the Tec and Salem State. Photo: Courtesy

A message turned into art

Each piece presented in the exhibition **resulted** from a **creative process** that began with students **thinking** about the **environmental impact** of **everyday consumption**. Students from both universities chose **waste materials** they **found** and **transformed** them into **pieces** loaded with **symbolism**.

Emma Hernández used candy **wrappers, tickets, old papers, cardboard,** and **paint** to **represent a musical exchange** between cultures. *“We realized that music can easily connect people from different places, so we decided to show the covers of two bands from our countries,”* she explained.

Mohssine Manaf worked with **bottles, cans,** and **pizza boxes** to create a **digital human figure**, while his classmate **Israel Sánchez**, from the Tec, designed a **tree** made from **recycled materials**. *“We’ve connected two landfills, one in the United States and one in Mexico, to show how the problem is shared,”* he said.

For her project, **Kallyn Lavallee** created a series of **three-dimensional pieces** from **plastic bags** and **water bottles**. *“I crocheted a bag out of plastic and then made a bouquet. I find plastic interesting because we normally see it as a transparent material, but when you mold it in layers, it stands out more,”* she shared.

Alejandro Trejo said that his work is inspired by **classic figures in art**, such as **The Great Wave off Kanagawa**, reinterpreting them from a sustainable perspective. *“Each element had a new purpose: to become art, protest, and thought,”* he said.



Three-dimensional pieces made from recycled plastic and digital collage form part of the binational exhibition Trash to Art. Photo: Courtesy

Art as an agent of change

The **students** were **thrilled to see their work displayed** in an **international gallery, an experience** that **reinforces** the **value** of **art** as a **medium** for **communication** and **social awareness**.

"Seeing my work on display made me realize that art has no borders. It can connect people from different cultures and evoke emotions without the need to speak the same language," said **Fernanda Torres**.

Alejandro Trejo said that seeing his work **interact** with other people in an **international context greatly impacted** him. *"A work of art made with simple materials now connects with people from very different backgrounds to mine. It made me feel heard and understood,"* he added.

Kallyn Lavallee thought about how her **view** of what is **disposable changed**: *"During and after making my pieces, I appreciated the material more. It's funny how we decide what is valuable and what to discard."*

The **professors** agreed that **art** can be a **powerful medium** for raising **environmental awareness**. *“Collaboration is better than confrontation. We can work together to tackle global challenges,”* said Professor Francisco González.



During the opening of Trash to Art, visitors toured the sustainable art exhibition at Salem State University. Photo: Courtesy

Conciencia ecológica desde la creatividad

Through the project, students from both universities **thought about how much waste** they **generate daily** and how it can be **turned** into **art** with an **environmental message**.

“This project allowed me to use waste as a medium to create a product with someone from a different culture, convey a message, and share a visual experience,” said student Fernanda Torres.

Alejandro Trejo, an architecture **student** at the **Tec**, described the process as *“an exercise in transformation and deep reflection. It made me realize that not all disposable things are useless.”*

Mohssine Manaf, a **graphic design** student from **Salem**, highlighted: *"I used to think that trash was something you just threw away or recycled, but now I see that it can be transformed into something beautiful and lasting."*

The experience also *helped* **students** such as **Emma Hernández**, from the **Tec**, to **recognize** that *"you don't need professional materials to convey a message, as long as you have a clear idea of what you want to express."*



Fashion designs made from newspapers and recycled materials were among the artistic creations at Trash to Art. Photo: Courtesy

From the classroom to an international gallery

Trash to Art began as a **collaboration** between the **Tec's Hidalgo campus** and **Salem State University** to **connect art** with **sustainability** from an **educational perspective**.

The project is part of a **COIL** (Collaborative Online International Learning) initiative that allows students from **different countries** to collaborate on **joint academic experiences**.

Professors **Francisco González** and **Tereza Swanda**, both art professors, promoted the proposal after identifying **common interests** in **contemporary art** and the **UN Sustainable Development Goals**.

"We wanted to work on a global problem, so we decided to focus on climate change," said Professor González.

"Art has a unique ability to question the current state of the world. It doesn't always aim to provide answers, but rather to ask questions worth asking," said Professor González.

Creating without borders

bridges of communication and **understanding** despite **cultural, linguistic, and time differences**.

One of the **main challenges** was coordinating **work sessions** between students who had never met in person. *"Everyone had their activities, so working together was sometimes complicated,"* said **Fernanda Torres**.

Alejandro Trejo said the key was to **develop** more **empathetic communication**: *"We had some differences in how we worked, communicated, and even in the message we wanted to convey. We learned to listen to each other, to be patient, and to empathize through creativity."*

Kallyn Lavallee, an **Art and Design** student from Salem, overcame **language barriers** thanks to **digital tools** and the support of her **classmate** in **Mexico**. *"Thanks to Google Translate and a lot of enthusiasm, we understood each other and discovered that we shared the same values and ideas."*

Despite the challenges, **intercultural dialogue** became **essential** to the **artistic and learning process**. *"Our cultures are not opposed to one another; we can work together to tackle global challenges,"* said **Professor Francisco González**.

“Art doesn’t always provide answers, but it raises questions worth asking.” - Professor Francisco González

An ongoing project

The **collaboration** between **the two universities** doesn’t end with this **exhibition**. According to **Professor González**, the **plan** is to take the **exhibition to Mexico** and explore **new formats** that include more **disciplines** and **participants**.

“We want to bring the exhibition to Pachuca or a local gallery. We want to do the same thing in Mexico as we did in the United States,” he said.

The **Trash to Art** experience not only put **works of art on display** but also sparked a shared reflection among the students: **art** can **transform** how the world is perceived and **open paths** to **tackle global challenges** through **creativity**.

“One of the most powerful ways to change culture is to embody the principles we learn,” said **Professor Tereza Swanda**. *“These experiences allow students to recognize their impact and establish new relationships with materials, the environment, and themselves.”*

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