

ON THE BORDER BOUNDARY MONUMENT PROJECT DOCUMENTS WHAT IS, WAS AND WILL BE

Art Matters

HARMONY HAMMOND for the Journal



Borders are sites of negotiation. They speak of boundaries, property, money, power, politics and nations. “Border art” engages these issues. David Taylor photodocuments what the border actually looks like, the physical place. In “Working the Line,” his first exhibition at James Kelly Contemporary, Taylor presents selections from two related series: photographs of border monuments that mark the Mexico — United States border from Juarez/El Paso to Tijuana/San Diego and photographs of events along that border.

By his own account, “a white boy from the Northeast,” Taylor, who teaches at New Mexico State University in Las Cruces, “stumbled upon the subject of the border.” In 2006, he received a commission resulting in the opportunity to ride along with and photograph Border Patrol agents on the job in West Texas. That’s when he came across the border monuments positioned by the International Boundary Commission after the Mexican-American War (1846-1848).

In the 1850s, 52 masonry obelisks were installed along the border at varying distances dependent upon the terrain (“visible by line-of-sight by a person on horseback”). In the 1880s, cast iron obelisks were added, bringing the total to 258. Shortly after, Albuquerque photographer D.R. Payne, working for the commission, photographed every monument and published those photographs as an album in 1899. Since then, additional monuments have been added from time to time —mostly due to population growth.

In 2007, Taylor set out to re-enact Payne’s historical project and document all the existing monuments, now numbering 276 — a huge undertaking given that many of the monuments are in difficult-to-reach remote desert or rugged mountain locations — and, in 2008, received a Guggenheim Fellowship enabling him to switch from color film to digital processing.

The exhibition’s title “Working the Line” is a reference to the way agents describe their daily surveillance work along the border. Given documentary photography’s promise of “truth” and its history of surveillance, Taylor, continues to “work the line” from both sides of the border.

While his photographs don’t take a political position, their seemingly objective documentary stance indirectly comments on U.S. immigration policy. (Taylor’s politics are more evident in his book of the same title published by Radius Books in 2010).

By choosing camera angles that closely approximate those in Payne's survey, Taylor underscores the passage of time and change along the border. The monument is usually centered in the photograph. Often, no other border demarcation can be seen in the surrounding environment, or the monument is surrounded by symbolic fencing that can easily be crossed over or under, "testament to past generations of border etiquette" in contrast to the current U.S. obsession with surveillance and security. Still others are in high crime drug traffic zones of border towns. Many are weathered and vandalized with graffiti and gunshot.

These are un-peopled landscapes — the monuments, a procession of solitary sentinels along la frontera, standing in for human figures. Most are viewed from a distance, suggesting a sense of surveillance. However, the obelisks refuse to tell their stories; they simply stand bearing witness to crossings and change.

With only a handful of monuments left to photograph, Taylor intends to complete his project this fall. Originally intended as a stand-alone project, the monument series became a way to document change along the border.

Layering representation upon representation, Taylor's photograph of a mural painted on what appears to be the interior wall of a building ruin in Sonora exemplifies this change. The mural curiously depicts cacti and critters welcoming two people running from a van, crossing back into Mexico, with the migra helicopter hovering above. It's not clear if this mural was painted for what once might have been a restaurant, or later after the building collapsed, but Taylor's composition carefully lines up the border fence in the painted mural with the fenced horizon seen in the distance. The "designated" border, its painted representation, and the photograph combining the two, refuse an easy read.

The border has changed more in the last decade than in the previous 100 years. What was a small rural border patrol when Taylor began photographing over four years ago has since been ramped-up into a huge federal bureaucracy and infrastructure, with the Border Patrol more than doubling in size and the army corps of engineers constructing over 600 miles of pedestrian fencing and vehicle barriers.

Granted unprecedented and unrestricted access to locations, operations and facilities not open to the public or media, Taylor created a corresponding body of work documenting: migration paths, illegal immigrants (usually economic or political refugees), agents, smugglers, surveillance equipment, contraband, drop off and check points, and the ongoing construction.

While giving face to the border, these photographs are not as visually compelling or conceptually layered as those in the monument series. However, juxtaposed as they are at James Kelly Contemporary or in the Radius book, the two series rigorously engage narratives of "place," as well as documentary and landscape photography, teasing out complexities and contradictions of the border's physical, social and political topography.

A selection of Taylor's border images will be included, along with work by photographers

Michael Berman and Connie Samaras, in “Past, Present, Future,” New Mexico Museum of Art” (Oct. 28, 2011-April 22, 2012).

If you go:

WHAT: David Taylor “Working the Line”

WHERE: James Kelly Contemporary, 1601 Paseo de Peralta

WHEN: Through Oct. 8

CONTACT: 989-1601 or [www. jameskelly.com](http://www.jameskelly.com)



“Drop-off Spot and Border Fence, Sonora, 2009” is an archival inkjet print by David Taylor. The fence ends about a mile from this point, where it runs into a rugged mountainous landscape. Anyone can walk around the end.



“Mural (with border fence), Sonora, 2009” is an archival inkjet print by David Taylor. This curious mural was painted on a wall in one of the collapsed and abandoned buildings seen from afar in “BorderMonument No. 198.”