

Frontier/Frontera

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Essay by Mónica Ramírez-Montagut



“The southern frontier is one of the most emotionally charged zones of the United States, second only to its historical predecessor and partner, the western frontier. The border has become the symbol of a strong and fortified nation that is protected on all sides from invasion and infiltration of harmful or unwanted people, ideas, and things,” explains Camilla Fojas in her recent book, *Border Bandits*. As she states, this awareness of the border is problematic. Seeing the border and immigrants as a threat to national security and positioning them under suspicion of possible terrorist activity does not address a roster of historical, complex, and multifaceted issues not related to 9/11. Indeed, talking about the U.S./Mexico border sparks intense opposing reactions in different constituencies.

By contrast, the beauty, clarity, and sharpness of the images by New Mexico-based photographer David Taylor encourages the viewer to an inspired contemplation; to simply enjoy the images or, if desired, to probe the complexities of the region. This exhibition does not present the familiar fraught image of the immigrant, but offers images to which we generally do not have access, such as those made while accompanying Border Patrol agents during their field operations. Through the gaze of the agents, Taylor documents both the complexity of the border and the routine work of patrolling it. His photographs depict the agent’s working spaces, their surveillance methods, and the landscapes in which they work. Among the most dramatic is their watch during the historic annual pilgrimage up Mount Cristo Rey, at El Paso, Texas, which straddles the boundary between Mexico and the U.S. Agents secure the border as thousands of U.S. worshipers ascend the peak to pray at the base of a 29-foot limestone crucifix, while ensuring that those on the Mexican side of the mountain are sent back. The pilgrimage is one of the many complex issues that Taylor engages in his work.

My interest in Taylor’s artwork grew from a visit to El Paso, when for the first time I was guided to the physical U.S./Mexico border by the artist himself. Born in Mexico and now resident in the U.S., I was curious to experience the actual border and challenge my preconceived ideas of the activities that actually take place there. My basic understanding of the border was based on media information and a vague expectation originating, perhaps, from mainstream movies that deal with border issues. From my visit with the artist, I realized that the high-tech invisible surveillance systems used by the Border Patrol contribute to the prevalence of iconic images of the border/desert, the no-man’s-land vastness, and the commanding horizon typical of cowboy movies. Taylor’s work intrigued me because it simultaneously presents those invisible mechanisms while exploring and providing similar iconic images to those that persist in popular culture.

Some of the most prolific images of the U.S./Mexico border have their origins in Hollywood

movies that have transferred the formula from the cowboy/western movie of the late 1940s to the 1980s agent/border movie. Taylor's work falls within this transition from the idealized representation of the American West to the contemporary landscape of the U.S./Mexico borderlands. For him, "the West is still most often portrayed as a compilation of its romantic icons: grand vistas, rugged cowboys, savage natives, and lonely cacti" and "the ongoing settlement of the western states is, in part, fueled by our belief in those icons." Thus, on the one hand Taylor's images call forth those associations. They present the open desert, the "heroic" mission of the cowboy—updated to the DEA or Border Patrol agent—the architectural signs of abandonment, masculinity, and the battle between civilization and barbarism now cast in terms of legality and illegality. On the other hand, he argues that the border occupies a different role in that it "currently exists as a militarized zone in our national consciousness: it is a state of politicized reality that is in direct conflict with our idealized image of the West." To this end, part of his work also reveals that conflict.

In this exhibition, Taylor presents three distinct groups of work that address various facets of the border issue, some of which escape common expectations. Most striking is the image of Mount Cristo Rey, a religious pilgrimage site, in the series *A Measure of Faith and a Line in the Sand*, which challenges the stereotypical representation of the borderline. The *Working the Line* series focuses on the little-known operations of Border Patrol agents, and the videos in *Frontier/Frontera* emphasize the dichotomies prevailing in the region, while reconsidering the figure of the cowboy.

Two large panoramic landscapes, five smaller images, and a video comprise the series *A Measure of Faith and a Line in the Sand*, a work which echoes the artist's understanding of the similar aspirations expressed in the journeys of both religious pilgrims and immigrants. In both cases, the objectives of the journeys are access to a better life. Four of the smaller images depict the border monuments that were erected during boundary surveys conducted in the 1800s. Another one depicts the pilgrimage route up Mount Cristo Rey. The monuments start on the flank of Mount Cristo Rey and mark the entire land border from El Paso to the Pacific coast. There are approximately 276 monuments, of which the artist has documented 91, representing the artist's own ritualistic pilgrimage.

In the *Working the Line* series we see the everyday surroundings of the Border Patrol agents. In its evidentiary format, this straightforward documentation of their environment presents a compelling portrait of the agents, as in *Office Work (shared desk)*, TX, 2007. In this photograph we read the desk sign "David J. Rivera, Supervisory Border Patrol Agent" and then find a different agent, a woman, working at that station; in the background we make out some children's drawings dedicated to their dad. The image conveys a human dimension that is rarely brought to our attention.

Other photos from this series make visible the invisible. Taylor documents different surveillance and tracking methods. *Drag*, NM, 2007, shows the drag system made of old tires the agents use to erase any signs of foot or vehicle traffic, so fresh incursions across the border are more easily identified. *Seismic Sensor*, TX, 2007, depicts the sensors that are buried underground, allowing areas to be under invisible surveillance without the presence of an agent. *Camera Room*, NM, 2007, presents a darkened chamber filled with monitors delivering live video feed from surveillance cameras, and *Intell Info*, TX, 2007, shows the names and portraits of the dogs that accompany the agents in Marfa, Texas. *Detention Cell (with serape)*, NM, 2007, and *Kilo Vehicle Interior*, 2007, stand out for their visual beauty in clear contrast to their content: stark spaces in which people are detained.

The video work from the series *Frontier/Frontera* deals with the dichotomy of the U.S./Mexico borderlands. This work embodies the dual values originated in a region where current bi-national relations intensify the continuation of identities based on differences. This is furthered by U.S. popular culture that defines U.S. national identity in comparison to values associated with the

borderlands and their mythologized inhabitants. One of those inhabitants is the cowboy, yet the cowboy figure as quintessentially American is problematic. Some authors affirm that the cowboy is an outgrowth of the Mexican vaquero, who migrated north to expand his skills in ranch work. Also, Hollywood movies present the cowboy as a figure that thrives on transgressions while inhabiting a land that is often a repository of all things illegal. Reconstructing the genealogy of the cowboy, Taylor presents a three-monitor video work. In one video loop, cleansing the cowboy from further connotations, we see a roundup of livestock. A second, central monitor is dedicated to a sequence that follows the stretch of pedestrian fencing that divides the United States and Mexico in many areas along the border. The third monitor plays out one current Mexican presence, the chili picker. Both figures, cowboy and chili picker, are metaphorically separated by the border and are thus, seemingly, in opposition. Yet in Taylor's composition, they share a dignified, productive, and active place in the borderlands' economy, striking an uneasy kind of balance.

The work *Jeep/Metate*, 2005–08, maintains a polarity displayed on two side-by-side monitors. One monitor's footage features a Texas ranch owner who contemplates his property as he drives through it. On the other, we see the reconstruction of an ancient metate the artist found during a desert trip. The stone mortar, used for grinding corn by the pre-Columbian inhabitants of the borderlands, brings to mind a forgotten past. Both scenes play out as distant perceptions of the same land; one is a surveying gaze across the land from afar, the other, a more intimate interaction that invokes a seemingly distant history. Both perspectives, beautifully conflated in this video and the exhibition in general, point toward the gradual erosion of traces of traditional, ancient, historical, and peaceful coexistence, as they cede their place to ownership based on distant surveillance.

Mónica Ramírez-Montagut, Curator

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