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Postcard from the Border: David Taylor

Posted by *Whitney Johnson*

As tensions on both sides of the border escalate—violence in northern Mexico, legal battles in Arizona—the national conversation around immigration seems to grow more polarized with each passing day. Guggenheim fellow David Taylor’s new monograph, “Working the Line,” seeks a balance between extremes. “It’s convenient for the sake of brevity to boil the narrative down and populate it with a cast of stereotypical players,” he writes in an e-mail. “You can find examples of any of those stereotypes, but the challenge is to see beyond them.”

Though Taylor had initially intended to photograph the entire length of the border, he became interested in a series of monuments that were installed in the eighteen-nineties by the International Boundary Commission, demarcating the six-hundred-and-ninety-mile stretch from the Rio Grande to the Pacific Ocean, and set out to document all two hundred and seventy-six markers. Despite the ramped-up efforts to erect a barrier between the two countries, in many places the monuments are the only indication of the international boundary in an otherwise contiguous space. Along the way, Taylor befriended U.S. Border Patrol agents, provided water to migrants, and encountered smugglers, who warily let him continue on his way. “Some would argue that it’s impossible to maintain objectivity if you don’t just get the story and get out,” Taylor writes. “In my case, I think the trust that developed was the very reason I was able to make my project.”

Here is a small selection of what he saw, with excerpts from our interview.



- *Trophy Belt and Novels, FOB Camp Desert Grip, Arizona.*

“I received a commission from a Border Patrol station in West Texas, which resulted in the opportunity to ride along with border patrol agents as they did their work. I was able to photograph agents, facilities, and operations with a great deal of freedom. That initial access at one station expanded all along the border.”



- *Border Monument No. 137, N 31° 27.385' W 111° 27.687'.*

“I could never have imagined that I would end up having both immigrants’ rights activists and border patrol agents as personal friends.”



- *Holding Area, Arizona.*

“We’ve lost the ability to disagree and still continue with a civil conversation. I don’t necessarily share the views of the various people I’ve worked with, but the capacity to engage in a conversation and listen has been vital to the collaboration.”



- *Border Monument No. 227, N 32° 38.453' W 115° 49.033'.*

“The tension between frontier and *frontera* was the handle I needed to begin thinking about the border,” Taylor explained. “The literal meaning of frontier is identical in both English and Spanish, but the vernacular usage is strikingly different. In the American psyche, the frontier is an elusive destination: of individuality, self-reliance, and freedom. Conversely, *la frontera* adheres to literal definitions: the border; a delineation; an obstacle.”



- *Intell Info, Texas.*

“I realize that my access to border patrol and the capacity to move freely along the entire land boundary with relative ease was unique. They didn’t have to let me roam around stations and restricted areas, or ride with agents for hundreds of hours. This access was the thing I could offer that would fit into the larger constellation of preexisting work.”



- *Detention Cell (with serape), New Mexico.*

“Contradictions and incongruities emerged,” Taylor wrote, “like meeting agents with backgrounds rooted in Mexico who talk tough on border security and in the same conversation recount some example of heartbreaking compassion for people that they have apprehended in the line of work. The real point is the complexity. People are still dying in the desert, *narcotraficantes* are killing people, some agents abuse their authority, and I think our border policy is broken. But even that’s not the whole story.”



- *Seismic Sensor, New Mexico.*

“It’s really easy to paint the border in broad simplistic brushstrokes. In fact, I think that’s how it’s portrayed much of the time. I want my work to complicate that one-dimensional portrayal. The feedback I get from people in both the border patrol and the human rights community is that work is a fair portrayal.”



- *Mural (with border fence), Sonora.*

“Even with the prolific reporting on the borderlands, it seems to be represented in a fragmentary way. Images, anecdotal stories, and singular incidents become signifiers for the entire border.”