

The Whole Picture

The border gets examined in both a photo show at the UA and a documentary premiering at the Loft

by [Margaret Regan](#)

On a clear day, you see almost forever on the Tohono O'odham Nation.

Climb up high to take a look—any peak in the Baboquivari Mountains will do—then turn west, and you'll see an impossibly long sweep of desert disappearing into a range of distant blue hills.

"The Great Plain," a photo by David Taylor in his border show, *Working the Line*, at the UA's Joseph Gross Gallery, is big like that desert. Almost 7 feet long and 4 feet high, the color image captures the heartbreaking beauty of the rez, with its big sky and long horizon, and its saguaros, ocotillos and desert broom bringing bits of green to the brown earth. But the picture also details the damage that border fortifications are wreaking on that fragile landscape.

A row of rust-colored "vehicle barriers" snakes along the international line, slicing the O'odham lands in two, splitting the American north from the Mexican south. Metal posts are set in concrete a few feet apart, close enough to prevent cars from crossing over, but far enough apart that people and animals can walk through. The idea is to keep drug-dealers and migrant-smugglers from driving their loads across the border.

The barriers are meant to be environmentally friendly, and they're certainly kinder to the land than the hulking "pedestrian" walls that blockade much of the rest of the Arizona-Sonora border. But Taylor's long view demonstrates how badly vehicle barriers scar the land. Construction crews had to blaze roads through the desert to get to the border, and they left a wide construction road alongside it. A permanent disfigurement on the landscape, the road and barriers stretch across 75 miles of the Tohono O'odham Nation.

Taylor, a photography professor at New Mexico State University, got a Guggenheim fellowship in 2008 to document the U.S.-Mexico border. His 24 works on view look inside a Border Patrol migrant "holding area" in Arizona and a detention center in New Mexico, and scrutinize a Border Patrol agent's desk in Texas. (An ode to the skills of agents who track migrants through the desert hangs on the wall behind the desk: "Only this elite group knows the feel of a trail and the thrill of the chase.")

But the most interesting photos examine the hotly contested terrain of *la frontera* itself. The mud and muck of a California crossing are illuminated in a nighttime shot of "New River, Calexico/Mexicali." The moon and glaring streetlights highlight the sharp metal walls climbing down the riverbank and the filthy water in the ditch. Raggedy chain-link threads across the foreground, heightening the sense of entrapment.

"Pedestrian Fence Construction" zeroes in on the damage the new walls are doing to the landscape. The user-friendly name dreamed up by Homeland Security conjures something along the line of white pickets. In reality, the new fences are fortress-like walls, 14- or 16-foot behemoths consisting of metal poles placed inches apart. These walls now extend over several hundred miles of Arizona desert, much of it "protected" public land.

In Taylor's picture, six construction workers in hard hats are putting up poles easily three times their size. On the left, a crane is dropping a pole into place; on the right, a big cement mixer is shooting cement through a nozzle to fix the pole in place.

The dirt road paralleling the new wall is 60 feet wide, and as barren as any tract-home development in suburban Tucson. The desert has been scraped bare, and thousands of tire marks crisscross the dead patch of land.

Taylor has also tracked down some old border markers. Erected in the 19th century after the United States bought

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"Border Monument 4," by David Taylor.



Working the Line: Photographs by David Taylor

9 a.m. to 5 p.m., Monday through Friday, through Friday, Feb. 26

Artist talk and reception: 5 to 6:30 p.m., Thursday, Feb. 11

Joseph Gross Gallery

1031 N. Olive Road, in the UA Fine Arts complex

Free

626-4215

Living on the Border

Premiere of a documentary by Karl W. Hoffman

7:30 p.m., Wednesday, Feb. 10; patio reception at 5:30 p.m.; Q&A after the screening

Loft Cinema

3233 E. Speedway Blvd.

\$8 general; \$6 Loft members

322-5638;

[website](#)

up what's now Southern Arizona in the Gadsden Purchase, they're like mini-Washington Monuments, small white pillars set far apart in the landscape. Carved into their side is the inscription "Boundary of the United States, Treaty of 1853."

The photographer has found three of these remnants of the past. (He doesn't specify where they are, but they look like the monuments I've seen east of Douglas.) "Border Monument 4" still presides in a relatively unscathed landscape. It's pictured at dead-center of an undisturbed desert, where the only sign of border conflict is a useless length of barbed wire threading through the cacti.

"Border Monument 36" presages the upcoming destruction. Taylor stood on the south side of the line to take his picture, giving himself a Mexican viewpoint of the action. (The monument's text is written in Spanish: "Limite Republica Mexicana," it reads, boundary of the Republic of Mexico.) On the American side, a giant yellow earth-mover is chugging in from the right, and a surveyor's orange tape is on the monument itself, an ominous sign of disturbances to come.

In "Border Monument 89," the little white marker has been nearly obliterated by the vertical bars of the new wall. Thirteen metal bars cover almost the entire surface of the photo, dominating and subjugating the land. Between the bars, we can see only bits and pieces of desert, the branches of an ocotillo visually truncated by the poles, a curving hill sliced and diced.

The proud old West has at long last been fenced in.

Photographer Karl W. Hoffman zeroes in on occupied Arivaca, an Arizona border battleground now known not only for migrant crossings and Border Patrol enforcement, but for murder. (See Tim Vanderpool's "Murder in the Desert," Jan. 14.)

Hoffman moved to Arivaca—a place he calls the last frontier—to document the chaos on the border.

"I was just another journalist in the pack at first," he says. "Then we decided to move here, live on the border."

For nearly five years, Hoffman has been taking riveting black-and-white photos in his new neighborhood. He has chronicled the military helicopters buzzing migrants and ranch folk alike; border crossers traipsing through the desert; and townspeople warily watching as Border Patrol vehicles bounce though their once-sleepy town. He also looks at the "collateral damage" to the land.

Now, Hoffman is debuting a movie documentary, *Living on the Border*. A feature-length work at 95 minutes, the documentary combines video, narration and still images. It will have its premiere Wednesday, Feb. 10, at the Loft.

Hoffman didn't cover the Flores murders, he says; the father and daughter were slain on May 30, 2009, at the tail end of Hoffman's project. But he looks at all other aspects of the disorder on the border.

"This is not just a documentary about the plight of the migrants," he says. "Usually, when the media comes in, they get the story and get out. I'm connecting the dots, the whole picture."

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Living on the Border

Now Playing

East

The Loft Cinema
3233 E. Speedway Blvd.
(520) 795-7777
[Location details »](#)

Living on the Border (NR)
Wed 7:30 pm

Related Events

 **The Loft Cinema** @ The Loft Cinema
Fri., Feb. 5, 9 p.m., Wed., Feb. 10, 7:30 p.m. and Sun., Feb. 14, 7 p.m.
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Joseph Gross Gallery @ Joseph Gross Gallery
Mondays-Fridays, 9 a.m. Continues through Feb. 26
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