

Museum of Contemporary Photography Columbia College Chicago

La Frontera: The Cultural Impact of Mexican Migration

Featuring works by Michael Hyatt, Andy Kropa, Yoshua Ocon, Juan Pacheco, Antonio Perez, Heriberto Quiroz, David Rochkind, Ben Sáenz, Marcela Taboada and David Taylor.

October 8 - December 22, 2010



David Rochkind
Migrants Heading North in an Attempt to Enter the U.S., 2009

Viewer's Guide

This guide, which contains a curatorial essay, information on the works on view, and questions for looking and discussion was created as a viewer supplement to the exhibition *La Frontera: The Cultural Impact of Mexican Migration*. Free docent led tours of this exhibition are available. For more information see mocp.org/education/viewings or contact Allison Grant at agrant@colum.edu. To learn about public programs related to this exhibition see mocp.org/events.

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The Museum is free and open to the public

Monday through Saturday, 10am – 5pm

Thursday, 10am – 8pm

Sunday, 12 – 5pm

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La Frontera: The Cultural Impact of Mexican Migration

This exhibition explores some selected layers of the cultural impact of the movement of people from Mexico to the United States. The hope is that specific, personalized photographic projects might be an antidote to the harmful abstractions and over simplifications in the media on both sides of the border.

Inextricably but erroneously connected to illegal immigration in the U.S. public's mind is the current drug trafficking and drug related violence and subsequent political breakdown in Mexico. John McCain, who previously courted the Hispanic vote for his presidential bid, has publically associated all Mexican migrants with drug traffic, kidnapping and gun violence. Former Mexican president Vicente Fox, in a recent New York Times interview, pointed out that the increasing number of criminal drug families and the gun violence in Mexico are both absolutely caused by the huge U.S. drug market and weapons export industry.

The border, *la frontera*, is the choke point for these issues. While American politicians fantasize, and ask us to join them, about building a fence from Matamoros on the Gulf of Mexico to Tijuana on the Pacific, illegal migrants in search of work, some carrying children, walk the same trails as smugglers carrying sixty pound packs of drugs. The western desert border areas can be deadly to both.

The effects of migration on both sides of the border are massive. The population of Mexican Americans began to grow here in Chicago during the World's Columbian Exposition in 1893 and has not stopped. It is now the second largest in the country. It is important to celebrate the vitality and value of this community even while we learn of accelerated deportation trials in Arizona and mass murders among the current wave of hopeful migrants approaching the border.

-Rod Slemmons

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Projects on View

Andy Kropa

American, born 1976

The Mexican population in the town of West Liberty, Iowa has become, over multiple generations, nearly equal in number to the non-Mexican population. Situated in a river valley near Iowa City, the fertile farmland surrounding West Liberty allows for the cultivation of fruits and vegetables such as the highly regarded Muscatine melon that cannot be grown elsewhere. The labor-intensive harvesting of these crops has brought migrant workers to this region for six decades. Beginning in the 1940s the workers took up permanent residence. The recent opening of meat processing plants in West Liberty and neighboring Columbus Junction brought in a flood of new immigrants resulting in today's high population figures. As is the case within many immigrant enclaves, almost all of West Liberty's Mexican population comes from the same town in Mexico—Allende in the state of Durango. Money that has been sent back to Mexico from West Liberty has helped fund many improvements in Allende. - Andy Kropa

Juan Pacheco

American, born 1946

As an undergraduate at Cal State University Long Beach in 2001, while walking to my vehicle, a white female, who appeared to be frightened in some way, reported me to a security officer. As has been the case in many instances, I simply internalized this incident as a reaction to my appearance. As a man of color one is often reacted to as a threat within the mainstream community. Consequently, the De Colores project is concerned with perception and how stereotypes are processed using the photographic image. The project consists of a series of portraits of individual men of color who have achieved status within their respective communities. I have produced these images in order to encourage both an individual and collective confrontational dialog. My compositional strategy is grounded in anonymity—the focus of each portrait centers on the eyes. The mouth is not shown. This is a metaphor for the lack of an individual voice when confronted by circumstances directly related to misguided perceptions and stereotypes.

Much of my research centered on a collaborative survey. Sample images, along with a list of questions pertinent to my study, were both emailed and personally presented to a number of individuals of varying ethnic backgrounds for their comments and as a data collecting strategy. Their answers and comments were absorbed into my analysis concerning reaction to these non-traditional portraits. - Juan Pacheco

David Rochkind

American, born 1980; resides Mexico City

Heavy Hand, Sunken Spirit is a project about the societal costs and consequences of Mexico's violent drug war. It frames the violence as a symptom, as opposed to the problem, and one of a variety of symptoms that will haunt the country for generations. This country is in the midst of a "conflict" in every sense of the word, and when documenting this conflict it is important not to reduce what is happening to a series of nearly anonymous images of carnage that could be happening anywhere. I am not creating a story about violence that happens to be set in Mexico, but rather a story about Mexico's present situation, offering a snapshot of a time that will be referred to for decades as people look for answers to make sense of Mexican society. I want each image to convey a sense of Mexico, her color, and her culture.

The wounds of this war bleed into every corner of the country, staining the very fabric of Mexican life with violence, death and fear. The psychology of the country is also changing, as people become accustomed to horror and distrust, weakening an already fragile democracy. I am most fascinated by the space between what Mexico has always been and what this

carnage is creating. The heat of the conflict is melting two worlds together, making a singular Mexico defined as much by violence and tension as by history and culture. - David Rochkind

Marcela Taboada

Mexican, born 1958

Women of Clay, 1999 – 2003

San Miguel Amatitlán is a small Indian village in the southern state of Oaxaca. As soon as I set foot in this village, I knew that I had entered the heart of a Mexican truth: women feed this earth and their life is made of clay. Clay ovens for clay pans and pots, everything is touched and transformed by hands which are also the color of clay. But there was something unusual: these women were also building houses.

Most of the strong men have left the village and have crossed the northern border to try to earn money working in the U.S. Sometimes they send money home, but sometimes not. The younger men who have stayed are mostly deep alcoholics. The Vatican gave these women a grant of 17,000 pesos to help pay their living expenses during this time of crisis and change. The women decided to do something constructive with the money: build proper new houses. They altogether started building walls and roofs out of clay. This initially brought scorn and derision from the remaining men and elders because this is traditionally men's work. However, now that they have built twenty houses of excellent quality, they are looked upon with great admiration, an example of immigration affecting cultural change.

The history of these women is a life lesson for all of us. In order to support themselves and their families, they sew new soccer balls for 70 cents apiece. They can sew two balls per day if they work from sunrise to sunset. Old women also make palm hats and are paid 2.50 U.S. dollars for each. They have to make four hats to buy a liter of milk. Yet, these very same hands never stopped creating the finest dresses for their daughters or ironing a man's shirt, never forgot how to give a caress to a young child or console a grief. They have always found the time to put flowers in the church. And they retain a sense of humor. When I asked if they owned land, they said: "Our land is under our finger nails." - Marcela Taboada

David Taylor

American, born 1965

From the series *Working the Line*, 2007-2009

In 2007 I began photographing along the U.S/Mexico border between El Paso/Juarez and Tijuana/San Diego. The project was initially organized around an effort to document all of the monuments that mark the international boundary west of the Rio Grande. The effort to reach all of the 278 obelisks, most of which were installed between 1891 and 1895, inevitably led to encounters with migrants, smugglers, the Border Patrol, Minutemen and residents of the borderlands.

There are several moving and eloquent photographic essays by people such as Susan Meiselas, Alex Webb and Julian Cardona that address the topography of the border and the human dimension of the immigration issue as it relates to those crossing that border. There is no need to redo that work. However, there has not been a project that documents the Border Patrol in any depth. What does the new high-tech Border Patrol look like? What work do they do and how? Where do migrants get detained? My photographs are an attempt to fill that void with images rather than imagination.

During the period of my work the United States Border Patrol has doubled in size and the federal government has constructed over 600 miles of pedestrian fencing and vehicle barriers. With apparatus that range from simple tire drags that erase foot prints allowing fresh evidence of crossing to be more readily identified, to seismic sensors that detect the passage of people on foot or in vehicles, the border is under constant surveillance. To date the Border Patrol has attained "operational control" in many areas. However, people and drugs continue to cross. Much of that traffic occurs in the most remote, rugged areas of the southwest deserts. My travels along the border have been done both alone and in the

company of Border Patrol agents. I have been granted broad access to photograph field operations and the routine activities that occur within Border Patrol stations.

In total, the resulting pictures are intended to offer a view into locations and situations that we generally do not access, and to portray a highly complex physical, social and political topography.

– David Taylor, From Working the Line, Radius Books, 2010

Antonio Perez

American, born 1963

As a photojournalist who has been covering the current immigration movement, it has been a source of pride and a challenge to document. I take pride in witnessing and documenting the tens of thousands of immigrants and children as they take to the streets in a sea of humanity and assemble at Chicago's Federal Plaza, united in a passionate and common movement to voice their frustrations with an issue of great concern to more than just Latinos.

It is a challenge at times when I hear the hateful anti-immigrant remarks made by fellow Americans most of whom are the children of immigrants. Statements like, "Why don't they go back where they came from? Who do they think they are protesting here is such large numbers? They are all illegal, the police should round them all up." Many seem to have forgotten their own history, the challenges and treatments of their family members, and their protests against government policies. Or perhaps they have forgotten that the same hateful words were likely shouted at their ancestors when they arrived or made attempts early on to improve their situation.

I want to put my camera down and show them historic photographs of immigrants and children of immigrants who have sacrificed and died for this country during times of war. I want to take them to Washington DC and show them the thousands of Latino surnames written at the Vietnam memorial. I want them to see the treasures of my neighborhood here in Chicago.

But this time I say nothing, I am on the clock as a journalist and I document all that I see: the massive crowds, immigrants waving American flags as they march forward, families holding hands, faces of support among the onlookers, angry faces in the crowds, people fainting from exhaustion, garbage strewn all over the park from the marchers, graffiti on walls, and police in full riot gear. There are so many emotions to capture. I stay quiet and let my photos be the voice.

- Antonio Perez

Yoshua Okon

Mexican, born 1970

Canned Laughter, 2009

Multimedia Installation

Canned Laughter documents the creation of a *maquiladora*, a typical Mexican factory that is usually owned by a foreign multinational company and exploits underpaid workers. The factory conceived by Okón produces canned laughter, a fundamental multimedia product used by the entertainment industry. The artist rented a section of one of the many empty shells of former assembly plants in Ciudad Juarez, Chihuahua, and hired a group of people from the area to "orchestrate" their laughter in order to recreate different impressions: hysterical, nervous, wicked, and so on.

In this project Okón studies intently the communicative codes of the corporate image: from the uniform to the logo, and also the rationale of the set up of the factory. The artist wants the public to reflect upon the limits of the relationship between the original spontaneity of the emotion and the serial, linear logistics of contemporary industry.

In Okon's words, "the piece stems from my interest in the inexplicability of humor and its subtleties, and this project also has to do with the impossibility of translating "true" emotion and reproducing it through technological means. I am

interested in translating laughter in particular because I very much see it as a “social gesture” which also relates to my broader artistic process and political agenda.”

Michael Hyatt

American, born 1946

Migrant Artifacts and related work, 2003 - 2008

This is a contemporary story—of millions of people forced by global economic crisis to cross borders illegally. Yet it is also a story of individuals—a man who left his plastic sandals behind in the desert, a woman for whom a backpack became too heavy so she dropped it in the sand, a little girl whose pretty dress hangs ghostly white from the limb of a mesquite tree. These are people whose names we will never know, whose faces we may never see, but whose lives are important to all of us.

With my camera, I have traced lives along the migrant trail in the Sonoran Desert, from the dusty Mexican town of Altar to the Ironwood National Forest in Arizona—the most perilous crossing of the 1,951 miles of border between Mexico and the United States. Young men and women seeking only decent paying jobs have died by the thousands crossing north through this region.

The roots of this human crisis reflect to the instability of Latin America economies and the U.S. job market’s demand for cheap labor. While the 1994 North American Free Trade Agreement opened up cross-border commerce, a negative effect of the treaty allows subsidized U.S.-grown staples to undercut Mexican produce prices, depriving family farmers of a market for their crops. So they abandoned their own land and come to work ours.

*Human artifacts, both ubiquitous and mysterious, are found in migrant camps and along arroyos. Some carry deeper meanings not immediately apparent—we can only imagine the person reading *El Diario de Ana Frank*, perhaps a young Oaxacan girl who identified with the teenager doomed by the Holocaust. Likewise, the fate of the father in the family portrait lost in the desert is unknown but reminds us that long separations and even lives lost in the pursuit of prosperity are the prices some are forced to pay.*

In this time of polarizing public debate, questionable activity by citizen militias, and government inertia, it is my hope that this work will inspire social action leading to humane immigration policies that eliminate suffering and death along the migrant trail. – Michael Hyatt

Heriberto T. Quiroz

U.S., Born 1989

Student, Columbia College Chicago

Preface from *Momentos De Vida*, 2009

I think of my images as containing the heart and soul of the Pilsen community. These are photographs of the individuals that make up Pilsen and so proudly live there. In these images you will see the details of homes in the old buildings, the ones you might not stop and look at. The community of Pilsen is very religious and we celebrate that heritage proudly and respectfully. The murals on the walls tell a story of the people that live here and what they stand for. The events that go on here, whether they are positive or negative, have a strong impact on the community. Beside that is the beauty that blooms through the neighborhood—the people, religion, murals, landscape, signs, events, and buildings that make up one community called Pilsen. I want to welcome you to my world and the paradise that is here. -- **Heriberto T. Quiroz.**

Also on View

The following text is printed large scale and displayed as a part of this exhibition.

Benjamin Saenz, American, born 1954

Martin Luther King Day, 2010

From *The Book of What Remains*, Copper Canyon Press, 2010

Ode To Juárez No. 4

Monday in January driving up Mesa Street nice day sunny a break between cold fronts a young man maybe seventeen sixteen twenty nice looking holding up a sign *Need Help: family kidnapped in Juárez* don't look don't pretend not to see *him!* try to see *him!* his face sad uncomfortable uneasy not used to begging on the streets of El Paso or any street on this poor and broken city that's no more poor or broken than any other real American city except we're painfully obvious unable to hide we throw our brokenness up in the air in hopes it will fall back to earth as light as confetti a fucking parade let's not get all Charles Dickens here the kid's not Pip he's real actual interactive but definitely not like the beggars who sit on the Santa Fe Bridge who long ago banished the word *dignity* from their vocabularies who barely have enough water to drink water for a bath is a dream and when they thrust out their hands I don't I don't want touch don't want touch I am as dirty dirtier keep pretending I'm clean let's not get too superior mistake well bathed with clean we're all covered in our own shit some of us appear almost beautiful have good dentists or practice good hygiene or have good genes which is not the same thing as virtue I keep looking into his face *family kidnapped* I know confusion been teaching young men his age for twenty years too long not to know that look not like the veterans who sit around my street sitting around like crows banished from the flock veterans of a war that refuses to end which is life which is life right and yeah there's another fucking war right here on the border but these guys haven't gotten over the one they fought who could get over bombs exploding in your dreams veterans who drink eighteen percent wine who've lost themselves mentally ill not strong morally bankrupt hurt as hell can't afford anymore to be moral an expensive proposition someone hurt them hurt them now they don't give a damn shit in the alley don't give a howling coyote who sees their brokenness that word again and it's over for them though they will go on living if that's what it is and who gets to decide what living is me you the Catholic Church and is it over for Juárez and what would I do if I lived there move here like they'd let me in oh yeah sure come on over *and this guy this clean-cut Kid with the sign this kid what am I we supposed to make of him all of this* he's not a pro knows what a bath is knows what shame is lost doesn't want to be lost dark eyes looks American Americans have a look even Americans who are Mexican and live on the border Chicano Latino keeps blinking his eyes like he's going to cry like he's been crying all morning like he'll go home if he has a home *he must have* I want him to he's clean bathed go home break down cry forever *Please Help: Family kidnapped in Juarez* the end of history, the end of the world, the end of civilization maybe he's a fraud maybe he's a good liar *liar!* he's just exploiting the headlines someone got

beheaded the other day how medieval is that *London Bridge is falling down falling down* the pregnant girl who worked at Jimmy's got killed boyfriend into drugs what was the latest number two hundred three hundred one thousand this is the way we teach our children how to count and how many people have moved into El Paso and how many restaurants and businesses and now El Paso is thriving while Juárez dies can a city die? I never thought a city could actually die but this kid he's just exploiting the whole bloody is this what Wallace Stevens meant *We live in an old chaos of the sun* yes *he is* taking advantage of the situation *he is* we can get angry at a boy holding a sign instead of feeling a little compassion maybe we'll fall for the whole sham hand him a few bucks he'll have a drink make the world right and the world *will be right* in one of these nice little bar and grills next to the university where all the cars stop for red lights where everything is all order nobody knows anything about anybody who is that boy with the sign is his family kidnapped how many mother father sister baby brother who why what is the real story the woman next to me talking on her cell as her son stares out the window dreaming of and I drive away and why didn't I stop and ask what the real story was *why didn't I ask* because I fucking don't want to know write something beautiful I have a dream and you have a dream and we all have another beautiful lie that will help us forget that

Juárez is alive and well—and living in El Paso.

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Questions for Looking and Discussion

1. As you look at the individual works in these exhibitions, or at any photograph, consider the following questions:
 - Describe what you see--and hear in the case of Yoshua Okon's work--when you look at each artist's work.
 - What can you tell about how the work was made?
 - If there are multiple works by one artist, describe what the images have in common. Consider the choices made by the artist such as choice of subject matter; point of view; use of light; time of day; color palate; framing and composition; the final presentation of the work, etc.
 - What is the mood or feeling of these images? How do you feel when you look at them?
 - What do you think this work is about? Why do you think that?
 - Can you tell how the artist feels about his or her subject matter? If so, how does it show?

Other Questions to Consider:

2. Both Michael Hyatt and David Taylor photograph the region surrounding the border between the US and Mexico.
 - In which images do you notice the border? How is it visible?
 - What do you notice about each side of the border? How are the two sides alike? How are they different?
 - Are you able to identify the US side from the Mexican side? If so, how?
3. What knowledge and impressions did you have of this region and the issues surrounding the border and Mexican migration before you saw this exhibition? What sources of information might have contributed to what you know and think about the border?
4. The cultural impact of Mexican migration is a huge topic that couldn't possibly be summed up in one exhibition.
 - Did you learn anything new from the works in this exhibition?
 - Are there issues, or images related to this topic that you feel are not represented in this show? What else would you like to know or learn?