

PRESS COVERAGE



La Frontera: The cultural impact of Mexican migration

October 8 - December 22, 2010

1. New City Art, Oct. 18, 2010
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3. The Visualist, Dec. 7, 2010

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Review: La Frontera: The Cultural Impact of Mexican Migration/Museum of Contemporary Photography

► Photography, South Loop

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RECOMMENDED

In this comprehensive photo-documentary on the migration of Mexicans to the United States—seen from both sides of the border—curator Rod Slemmons succeeds in deconstructing the stereotypes pervading the current immigration debate. Bringing together ten U.S. and Mexican photographers, the exhibition takes us from a Mexican town where only women and children remain to do all the work, through the high-tech border-control apparatus, up the perilous paths taken by those who get through, down to the depths of the drug trade, and finally to destinations like West Liberty, Iowa and Chicago's Pilsen neighborhood where thriving communities take root. The nuance, subtlety, ironies and power of Slemmons' approach is encapsulated in Michael Hyatt's black-and-white shot of a Coca-Cola bottle and a dog-eared copy of "The Diary of Anne Frank" abandoned in the desert by an anonymous seeker for a better life. (Michael Weinstein)

Through December 22 at the Museum of Contemporary Photography, 600 South Michigan.



David Hyatt, "El Diario De Anna Frank - Migrant Camp," 2004



Borderzine

REPORTING ACROSS FRONTERAS

Going beyond physical borders: La Frontera photography exhibit at Chicago museum paints provocative portrait of undocumented immigration

BY LYNNDEL NORIEGA MCCULLOUGH ON DECEMBER 3, 2010

FEATURED. VOCES & BLOGS

CHICAGO — I once saw a painting of an immigrant hopping across the US-Mexico border. The artist had added butterfly wings to him. So is that how those Mexicans do it? They shout "Viva America!" and jump 15 feet from the ground because they actually believe they can fly?

Yes... and no. They leap knowing they'll fall; they have the will and faith to take a chance but hold on to an underlying expectancy to fail. Why?

Photographers in the exhibition, *La Frontera: The Cultural Impact of Mexican Migration*, show that Mexicans believe the United States is worth all of their sun-dried tears mixed with heavy sweat, because the Mexico they are running from is more of a hell than the punishing journey to enter the U.S. This exhibition at the *Museum of Contemporary Photography in Chicago* allows everyone to step into the shoes of an immigrant.



David Rotckind, *Train headed north with potential migrants to the US in southern Mexico*. (Reproduced under fair use terms by <http://www.mocp.org>)

The journey begins with David Taylor's photographs on the U.S. Border Patrol, then continues with David Rotckind's *Heavy Hand* *Sunken Spirit* photos and on to Michael Hyatt's *Migrant Artifacts: Magic and Loss in the Sonoran Desert*. Combined, these photographs tell multiple stories.

My imagination builds this narrative after viewing the exhibition as a whole:

A Mexican man named Chuy sits with his family (two cousins and son) in the middle of a great plain. In his pocket is some weed, some meth, his wife's hairbrush, a pack of cigarettes and \$20. His two cousins, Horatio and Paulo and his 14-year-old son, Philippe, sit between rocks and cacti and beneath sand that is glued to them by the fear that pastes their bodies. Everyone waits in silent trepidation, reciting prayers in their heads and waiting for nightfall to come before they set out.

Chuy takes a drink from his water carrier hanging around his neck, which he made from a sweatshirt, and hands his son a sour melon. He worries if the little food they brought will last the long desert trek. His cousin Horatio is busy making a small altar in a cove of bent trees to the Virgen Morena, also known as the Brown Virgin de Guadalupe. Horatio mumbles what Chuy tries to ignore: they need protection; they may not make it through the night.

Chuy's cousins are dressed in shirts that display the American flag and hats that say "New York" on them. Chuy had jokingly told them wearing that clothing would not fool the Americans or make them blend in. But Chuy knew they only wanted to fit in and show their support for a country they so desperately wanted and needed to call home.

Nightfall cannot come soon enough to disguise them with their panic in a cloak of darkness. Pavlo stares at his dirty hands and hums a famous ballad about a murderous drug lord of Mexico.

Chuy quiets him but the song sticks in Chuy's mind and his memories begin flowing with images of a life he is leaving behind. His hometown was Ciudad Juárez, Chihuahua, and the center of Mexico's drug war. He remembers almost dying in a crack shack. He remembers his sister screaming that it was the only thing she could do when he tried to stop her prostitution.

He remembers being haunted by his mother's terror-stricken eyes as she knelt to the Saint Jesus Malverde after the injustice of losing her son to a gang. He remembers walking the graffiti streets and the smoke capturing and mingling the smells of death with hopelessness. And he remembers people circled around his Uncle Eduardo who was blindfolded, beaten, bound, and shot in the head, his blood staining a sharp red along the sidewalk—a warning to the people from drug cartels.

Chuy jolts upright from these terrifying memories by Horatio's voice telling him curtly that it's time to go. It is dark. Chuy looks over at his son and sees him posting a picture of the family against a cactus. When Chuy asks him why, his son says it's for others to look upon for hope and guidance. They leave. Their footsteps sound too loud to Chuy. They must have been walking stealthily for three hours when Chuy hears an engine. His heart drops, he stops breathing. A beam of light whips them all in the face. "Run!" he shouts. He holds his son's hand and they all begin running from the border patrol and their growling vehicles. Chuy hears shots, a cry from Pavlo, but he keeps running with his son. "Por favor, Dios mío," he thinks...

The up-close-and-personal photos in this exhibition evoke many disheartening questions about the lives of immigrants. My story above is just one possible interpretation, one plausible scenario, from the exhibition. As viewers, we cannot possibly know what really goes on beyond each photo. All we see is a snapshot, a small piece of pain and love, framed. When we walk out of the exhibit, back onto our bustling streets of traffic with our own agendas, Mexico slips away, off the personal map.



David Taylor, *Pedestrian Fence Construction, NM, 2007*. (Reproduced under fair use terms by <http://www.mocp.org>)

And when we are reminded of our neighbors down south by the evening news, we are never told the full story. So, of course, Americans say or think things like, "Those wetbacks are bringing the economy down with their cheap labor!" – although Michael Hyatt points out in his *Migrant Artifacts* photo explanation, "Millions in Mexico are forced by global economic crisis to cross the border illegally."

"But those wetbacks increase crime here in America!" It's true that Blacks and Hispanics make up the highest percentage of incarcerated criminals in the U.S. However, photographer David Rotckind states with

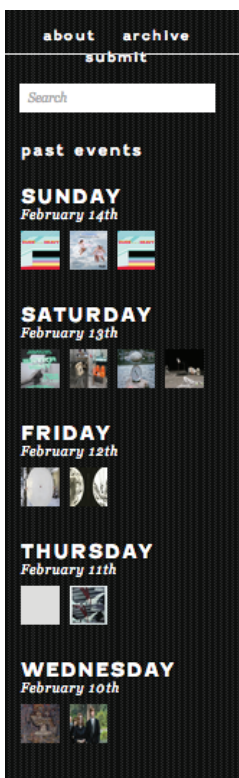
his *Heavy Hand* *Sunken Spirit* photos that the consequences of Mexico's drug war includes extreme violence, but the violence "is a symptom as opposed to the problem." Mexicans come to the U.S. to escape their own culture of horror and distrust, to start anew and to heal.

"Yeah, well wetbacks are taking over America!" David Taylor's photographs on the U.S. Border Patrol actually reveal how diligent and technologically advanced the patrol men are in effectively securing the border, which David Rotckind says has kept a lot of immigrants and drugs inside Mexico.

The exhibition isn't about whether you are for or against immigration. Even though we are all raised with certain biases, the exhibition tries to dissolve ethnocentrism (judging other societies by using one's culture as a standard of measurement) and replace it with the practice of cultural relativism (not judging a culture but trying to understand it).

It's important to understand how Mexico is changing and sinking into the hands of drug lords. What's it really like to find one's certainty in life chiseled down week after week by violence and unpredictable situations? What's it really like to live like you have a gun to your head, never comfortable? *La Frontera* Exhibition provides the real pictures to accompany these feelings without the media-fed reports.

Even Americans who are Justin Bieber fans can go through the exhibition and then say, "Wow, we sing songs about a 16-year-old boy while Mexico sings songs about cold-blooded, fearsome murderers..." Get the picture? There's a lot to think about.



OCT 7TH 2010

La Frontera: the Cultural Impact of Mexican Migration

@ Museum of Contemporary Photography
600 S Michigan Ave, Chicago, IL 60605

Opening Thursday, October 7th, from 5PM - 7PM
On view through Wednesday, December 22nd

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The idea for this exhibition originated when MoCP Director Rod Slemmons served as a member of the Mexican Community Roundtable of the Chicago Council on Global Affairs. He realized that there were many layers and generations of migration and immigration present at the table, all with varying agendas and degrees of mutual understanding and tolerance. He felt that these multiple viewpoints were quite different from the simple, commonly held notions of immigration promulgated by the news media in the U.S.

Work by Michael Hyatt, Andy Kropa, Yoshua Okón, Heriberto Quiroz, Juan Pacheco, Antonio Perez, David Rochkind, Marcela Taboada and David Taylor.

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