

“Creating a Border: Art, Politics, and Stories”

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Borders are meant to be taken for granted, in a way one takes for granted that the sky is blue or the earth is firm. Nations, as defined by their borders, order today’s human world so thoroughly that, according to anthropologist Benedict Anderson, everyone born today is assigned a nationality along with a gender as a matter of course. But unlike the geological time scales of natural history that aspire to the eternal, nations themselves are very much recent historical constructs, dating back only about the eighteenth century. Borders are much older in both concept and experience, having served for millennia to define the contours of kingdoms, empires, and yet other large-scale forms of human collectivities tied to specific territories. Thanks to the incredible foresight of Juan Antonio Sandoval, Jr., we have before us, in the Mexic-Arte exhibit “Mexico, the Border, and Beyond,” the opportunity to revisit the creation of one specific border—the U.S.-Mexico one—through a superb collection gathered over a vibrant lifetime. Sandoval spent most of his lifetime in the twin border cities of El Paso/Ciudad Juárez, where he worked as a reference librarian in art and Chicano studies at the University of Texas at El Paso. He also gathered, over a period of thirty years, a deep collection of art by Chicano, Mexican, and other artists that focused upon the lived aesthetic experience of that border. In doing so, he created a window through which we can view what borders would conceal but what borderlands reveal.

I will focus on one specific aspect of this exhibit: the creation of the U.S.-Mexico border not simply as a historical fact about two intertwined nation-states but as an ongoing, evolving lived experience captured, and questioned, by borderlands artists, some of the most keen and

critical commentators upon this experience. What they communicate is not just the effects of the border upon everyday lives, mental states, or political economies, but upon the continuous struggle between the United States, Mexico, and, most of all, the people of the borderlands to define what the border means at any given moment. Not that this struggle proceeds upon a level playing field. The U.S. federal government exercises its considerable power advantage at every possible opportunity, while the Mexican state strives to maximize its advantages in ways it best can and while ordinary people try to find agency in the interstices between the two nation-states. It is within these interstices that the artists in the exhibition inhabit, and from where their commentaries and critiques are made.

If nation-states are historically recent, they have also created mythologies of coalescing from the pre-historical recesses of deep time in a reconning of their own legitimacy. In the cases of the United States and Mexico, these autochthonic narratives are at the expense of the indigenous nations displaced through settler colonialism. For the United States, the mythology proceeds through genocidal replacement of indigenous peoples while appropriating their “nativeness” to justify the creole revolt against the now-oppressive British Empire. Through the Enlightenment figure of “the Noble Savage,” white creoles put on red-face to play Indian for the Boston Tea Party of 1773, a key event leading to the independence of the Atlantic seaboard North American British colonies. For Mexico, national liberation from the Spanish Empire proceeded by mobilizing substantial mestizo, indigenous, and Afro-descent support alongside that of criollo elites; this was cast as the native-born against the foreign, tyrannical Peninsulares. In both cases, drawing legitimacy for “native” rule came directly by appropriating the right to rule from the displaced previous rulers from time immemorial.

But Marta Arat's untitled watercolor of a Rarámuri (Taramuhara) shaman conducting a curing ceremony suggests a different line of commentary about the appropriation of the indigenous image in the criollo mind. Rather than see this image as "incomplete" or "unfinished," it is rather more suggestive to consider the image as a meditation upon the profoundly collective nature of aesthetics and community for indigenous peoples. The world does not simply unfold as the shaman moves through the imagined world, slowly filling in the visual elements such as the shaman's vivid red outfit or, at the opposite end of detail, the ghost-like, penciled figure of a participant on the border of the mostly painted left-side and the lightly-sketched right. Rather, the invitation is for the viewer to move beyond observation and into participation, helping to bring life and aesthetic into existence in a way that respects, not appropriates, the coming-into-being of indigenous communities in the contemporary moment, and not simply in the past.

With its borders highlighted in the middle of the composition rather than at its edges, Arat's watercolor indicates what other tribal nations throughout the Americas, such as the Blackfeet Confederacy, referred to the U.S.-Canadian border of the 49th Parallel as "the Medicine Line," so named for its ability to keep U.S. troops from crossing into Canada to pursue them. The magic of the border only pertains to those who believe the fiction of territorial sovereignty as absolute and uncontested. This is yet another cornerstone of nation-states, for which the border marks both the beginning and end of the legitimate exercise of state power. But rather than demonstrating the total control of the nation-state, the borderlands reveal sovereignty, after Shakespeare's depiction of the usurping Claudius in *Hamlet*, as a fiction of "shreds and patches" that only exists when actual state agents enforce it. The borderlands has always been the haven

of smugglers, migrants, and others who challenge state authority, including those seeking freedom from slavery in the United States during the nineteenth century.

Yet state authority has been, and is, enforced, and the exhibit gives us several examples of how this was imagined as occurring during the Spanish colonial era. Well-known El Paso artist José Cisneros depicts the military, clergy, and colonists of the Spanish colonial period in “The First Thanksgiving,” a pen, ink, and color pencil drawing from 1989. Here, Cisneros shows a soldier, a priest, and a settler woman attending a communal feast between Spanish and indigenous peoples. This imaginative recreation of a 1598 meal of thanks for the entrada (settler colonial incursion) into what is now New Mexico by Juan de Oñate is meant to counter the Anglo-centric belief that North American British colonists initiated the tradition of Thanksgiving either in Jamestown or Plymouth Plantation in the first decades of the seventeenth century. But while Oñate’s “Thanksgiving” predates these by at least a decade, Cisneros’s recreation illustrates how the recovery of a Spanish colonial history to combat Anglo misperceptions of the contributions of “Hispanics” to U.S. history likewise occludes indigenous agency and resistance. Notably, of the dozen figures in the drawing, only two are indigenous, suggesting a decidedly one-sided affair. Oñate’s atrocities after “The First Thanksgiving,” particularly the 1599 Acoma Massacre, highlights how sovereignty and border that demarcate them are often established in blood.

And the history of the U.S.-Mexico borderlands is precisely a history of continual crises of sovereignty, dating back to its creation by the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo that ended the U.S.-Mexico War of 1846-1848. The story of how the United States used the pretext of a border dispute about the Texas-Mexico border after the former’s annexation by the United States in 1845 to conquer and annex Mexico’s northern half needs little rehearsal here. What is less known

is the Southern slave state politics behind the subsequent Gadsden Purchase of 1854, which established the current U.S.-Mexico border in the states of Arizona and New Mexico. Angel Bracho's treatment of the Mexican politics behind the Treaty of Mesilla, as this transaction is better known by in Mexico, illustrates the confluence of nefarious motives behind the U.S. annexation of yet another chunk of Mexican territory. Reminiscent of the famous satiric lithographs of José Guadalupe Posada, Bracho's *Compraventa de naciones* (1960) depicts the corrupt Mexican elites—starting with failed dictator Santa Anna but also the Roman Catholic Church and the business and social elites who supported him—in cahoots with masked robber Uncle Sam; the prostrate Mexican people are imprisoned beneath the papers (i.e., treaties) the Mexican elites have signed. What is perhaps less apparent is that a challenge to U.S. sovereignty motivated the deal as much as the U.S. South's desires to annex the Mesilla Valley for a southern-route transcontinental railroad. One provision of the Treaty of Mesilla negated the U.S. obligation, under the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo, to prevent Apache raids from originating from the U.S. side of the border. This proved not only costly but also impossible, highlighting how little control the United States had over its own territory within regard to the movement of indigenous peoples.

Uprisings and revolts in the borderlands, such as those by the Gipuy (Pueblo) in the 1680s, the Apache, Comanche, and other tribal nations throughout the nineteenth century, and those by Juan Nepomuceno Cortina in 1859 or *los sediciosos* in 1915, point to how U.S. sovereignty was contested openly by those who refused to recognize it. But lest we imagine the creation and contestation of the border to be a thing of the past, we should recall just how borders are challenged, even as they are recreated, today. The continuous history of trans-border smuggling in both directions, and the ongoing migrations from South to North, demonstrate

more clandestine forms of challenging national sovereignty. Both are well represented in the exhibit, but to close I will focus upon two artworks that depict less examined aspects of the U.S.-Mexico border.

The first of these is Francisco Delgado's *\$26* (1998), in which three cars, respectively driven by the dollar portraits of U.S. presidents Andrew Jackson, Abraham Lincoln, and George Washington, cross the international bridge from El Paso to Ciudad Juarez. Delgado explains that the painting highlights how ordinary Mexicans—from the window washer to the woman with her child—try to sell services or goods to gain a living via the almighty U.S. dollar. The absurdist scenario is twofold: that real people serve the abstract economy, embodied by the portraits of the presidents upon their respectively denominated bills; and that this economy is shown to have mobility across the border that people are denied. The “dollarization” of the Mexican economy under the 1994 implementation of the North American Free Trade Agreement, or NAFTA, and its detrimental effects upon Mexican workers frame this commentary. Masked as *lucha libre* luchadores, they are thrust into eking out survival at the edges of both countries.

The second is the Jellyfish Collective's 2016 serigraph *Leaning on the Border/Recargando sobre el Borde*. In it, a person casually leans against an implied but unseen wall with one foot while a dog urinates on the other. The accompanying caption suggest that the Jellyfish Collective wanted to capture a moment of surprise that didn't relate to an obsessive interest in the border's meaning: “Our work try to represent our opinion about this relation and how we all forget the more simple things like we all are just humans trying to live in this difficult world and fence and wait for the next nonsense decision, rule or law in this world while we see so many hard things passing by through our eyes, people looking for money, fmae [sic], and so many things with no real meaning and in that search all we lost a very value moment in our lives

and we don't see the amazing simple things, while a dog pee our shoe." The Jellyfish Collective suggests that our desire to make the border signify or otherwise meaningfully structure our lives means that we miss seeing other remarkable dynamics, such as the dog marking its territory as we obsess about which territory is ours. In this sense, the strange aesthetic of the serigraph becomes clearer: the left foot leans against an invisible wall is a reference to the three-dimensional illusion we accept as the truth of what we see on a two-dimensional surface, or that the left foot's illusion of resting upon a solid surface rests upon our understanding "the border" as the edge ("borde") of the serigraph itself. Drawing upon the double entendre of "borde" as understood in El Paso/Cuidad Juarez, the Jellyfish Collective wants to suggest that thinking of "la frontera" as only, or always, a border literally delimits our imaginations, whereas to rename the border as "the edge" displaces its power to narrate our lives.

The story of the border is one continually made and unmade, and the artists of "Mexico, the Border, and Beyond" map the responses to its changing meaning and chart the possibilities of its future, or even imagine its absence. Today, the national sovereignties that borders would enforce are under constant erosion from not only undocumented migration caused by economic hardships, ideological conflicts, and climate change, but also by the very forces of neoliberal capitalism, both legal and black market, that the United States and Mexico have promoted. The artists of the borderlands have captured this dynamic, and critically commented one way or the other as to the effects that borderland dwellers experience, rightly or wrongly. And thanks to the generous legacy of Juan Antonio Sandoval, Jr. and the institutional space of Mexic-Arte Museum, we can step out of our everyday lives for a moment to share their vision.

List of Artworks

Marta Arat
Untitled, n.d.
Watercolor on vellum, 19" x 24"
Mexic-Arte Museum Permanent Collection
Gift of Juan Antonio Sandoval Jr.

José Cisneros
The First Thanksgiving, 1989
Pen, ink, and color pencil, 21" x 31"
Mexic-Arte Museum Permanent Collection
Gift of Juan Antonio Sandoval Jr.

Angel Bracho
Compraventa De Naciones, 1960
Linocut on paper, 11½" x 8½"
Mexic-Arte Museum Permanent Collection
Gift of Juan Antonio Sandoval Jr.

Francisco Delgado
\$26, 1998
Oil on Canvas, 49½" x 87¾"
Mexic-Arte Museum Permanent Collection
Gift of Juan Antonio Sandoval Jr.

Jellyfish Collective (Leonel Portillo (Pilo), Atenas Campbell, Ricardo Herrera (Kukui),
Francisco Chavez (Pika)
Leaning on the Border, Recargando sobre el Borde, 2016
Serigraph on paper, 27½" x 19½"
Taller 75 Grados, Mexico City, Mexico

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