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The BORDERLANDS

Working on his own and with artist Marcos Ramírez ERRE, Arizona photographer DAVID TAYLOR envisions the US-Mexico border, both as it is, and as a state of mind.

By Deborah Ross

Whenever David Taylor heard talk of a “big, beautiful wall” along the US-Mexico border during the 2016 presidential campaign, he immediately pictured its pitfalls—its simplistic premise and its impracticality in a region so geographically, politically and socially diverse. Taylor, who has been immersed in border-related photographic projects spanning several years, probably knows the line of demarcation from Texas to Tijuana about as intimately as any civilian can know it. He once hiked 12 miles round trip to reach a rocky summit in the Tinajas Altas Mountains, where the ridge he followed crisscrosses the official border. He has encountered migrants, landowners and park rangers. And his regular presence along the border eventually allowed him to navigate it without drawing much attention from US Border Patrol agents and other officials.

This über-familiarity with a 690-mile portion of the border—as well as with “the border” as a construct—stems partly from two physically demanding, time-consuming, and methodologically intense projects. One of them, “Monuments,” is a solo project for the Tucson, Arizona-based Taylor, and the other is a joint project with the Tijuana-based Marcos Ramírez ERRE called “DeLIMITations.” The first project ran from 2007-14, and the second was concentrated in the summer of 2014. The photographs and videos that are the outcomes of the two endeavors have toured separately and together to the SITE Santa Fe biennial of 2014, the Nevada Museum of Art (early 2016) and the Phoenix Art Museum (mid-2016). In addition, “DeLIMITations” is at the Mexican Cultural Institute in Washington, DC, through January 28, 2017, and will have its Mexican debut in 2017 at the Universidad Autonoma de Baja California in Mexicali. Closer to home, “DeLIMITations” is currently on view through November 27, 2016, at the Museum of Contemporary Art San Diego Downtown (Jacobs Building).

“Monuments” resulted in 276 sublimely divergent color photographs of all 276 stone and cast iron obelisks that mark the US-Mexico border. Taylor’s objective was to “re-engage” with the photographic documentation undertaken by D.R. Payne of the International Boundary Commission between 1891 and 1895. “DeLIMITations,” on the other hand, has been described by the artists as a “guerrilla” intervention, a 2,400-mile adventure in which Taylor and ERRE placed quickly fashioned, temporary border markers where—to put it bluntly—they don’t belong.

In both cases, the journeys were as much a part of the artistic practice as the shooting of photos and videos at the actual destinations.

“BORDER MONUMENT No. 251 | LAT. 32 33.383’ LONG. -116 51.948’ |
SAN YSIDRO MONTAINS, OVERLOOKING TIJUANA,” 2010
PHOTO: COURTESY OF THE ARTIST.





With “Monuments,” Taylor regularly traveled from Tucson to points on the border, often anticipating that the four-wheel drive on his silver Toyota Tacoma would only take him so far. With water and food in his backpack and minimal camera equipment, he hiked on all kinds of terrain whenever necessary to reach certain obelisks. He traveled alone about half the time; at other times his companions were friends and colleagues. Some obelisks, he found, can be easily reached within border towns but many cannot. Because he primarily wanted to follow 19th-century government survey notes, he waited until he reached each obelisk before recording the GPS coordinates, along with the date and time.

Taylor sees his artistic practice as typology, and credits the influence of artists such as Bernd and Hilla Becher, who so assiduously documented water towers and other symbols of postindustrial Europe. Additionally, he calls his work “visual archaeology” in that his images often peripherally capture remnants of human presence, dating back decades—things like old cans to signal the way for coyotes, a serape used for marijuana bales, or a notebook left behind by another climber. Litter, stray dogs and graffiti make occasional appearances, as do vehicles and adjacent dirt roads.

There were many moments in the project, Taylor says, “when I’m trying to be in Payne’s headspace, having looked at his pictures a lot. Then there’s my own aesthetic proclivities that are superimposed on that. It’s sort of an aggregate of things that ends up being a re-photograph—on top of being a geographic cross-section endurance project.”

The variation from one monument portrait to the next is curious and remarkable, with each begging for a narrative despite an expectation of sameness in the obelisks’ materials, their slender and pyramid-topped shape, and their official engravings—one side for Mexico and one side for the US. Sometimes the obelisks sit in isolation; in other places, they are nestled in the activity of a border town. Among the most striking images are: *Border Monument No. 23 (Palomas, Chihuahua)*, where the white monument is dwarfed by the shadow of the weathered brown border fence; *No. 98 (West of the San Pedro River)*, where the barbed wire fronting a monument holds tiny American flags; *No. 122 (Pedestrian Crossing at Nogales Grand Avenue Port of Entry)* with two young boys who seem oblivious to the monument’s meaning; and *No. 251 (San Ysidro Mountains, Overlooking Tijuana)*, a sunset view of a city from a mountain overlook. As for the variation, Taylor says, “The obelisk is the destination, but the context is what gives the destination meaning.”

A 2008 Guggenheim fellow and a full-time professor at the University of Arizona School of Art, Taylor is part of a flourishing community of artists based in the Western US—representing many ethnic groups and nationalities—whose work addresses border issues, migration and displacement. The group includes Ana Teresa Fernández, Richard Misrach / Guillermo Galindo (“Border Cantos”), Kirsten Luce, Postcommodity, Hugo Crosthwaite, Chico MacMurtrie, Alejandro Cartagena and Tom Kiefer, as well as cross-border initiatives at the Arizona State University Art Museum, the Ruben Center at the University of Texas at El Paso, and other institutions. With artistic





"BORDER MONUMENT No. 207 | LAT. 32 43.082' LONG. -114 43.890' |
LOS ALGODONES, BAJA CALIFORNIA, WEST OF ANDRADE PORT OF ENTRY," 2009
PHOTO: COURTESY OF THE ARTIST

practices ranging from photography and mixed media works to site-specific installations and performance art, their work is gaining ground in museum exhibits across the country. Visitors to the group exhibition "Covert Operations: Investigating the Known Unknowns" (Scottsdale Museum of Contemporary Art, San Jose Museum of Art) might remember Taylor's revealing photos of Border Patrol agents on

portraits in an effort to shed light on the border town's multifaceted character. ERRE has helped him to get to know the place.

"DeLIMITations" took shape once SITE Santa Fe commissioned the project for its exhibition "Unsettled Landscapes." The mission: to travel from the Pacific Coast to the Gulf of Mexico to mark the 1821

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the job, often in tense situations. The works are from several weeks of his being virtually embedded with agents, and it won Taylor national attention.

The partnership with Marcos Ramírez ERRE has its roots in ERRE's 2006 exhibition at the Rubin Center, where Taylor first met him. ERRE has been making works that address the border for about a quarter-century, including an installation for the Whitney Biennial called *Stripes and Fence Forever: Homage to Jasper Johns*. ERRE recreated the American flag out of metal bars and iron mesh, then planted it in dirt, replicating the steel border fence that severs Tijuana from San Diego. ERRE recalls realizing that Taylor was photographing the obelisks on the existing border, and the two of them began discussing the border as a construct. As ERRE explains, "For us it was a natural conversation around our work, and the idea just popped."

The friendship only deepened as Taylor began spending time in Tijuana, launching a new project to capture street views and candid

border between Mexico and the United States, a boundary that existed less than 30 years, until the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo in 1848. The two artists embarked on their journey in summer 2014 with an almost prankster-like spirit. They outfitted a white Sprinter van to serve as a camper and mobile command center; it was prepped to cover thousands of miles and to offer the space and tools for fabricating the 47 temporary sheet-metal obelisks that would be set into place as they traced the 1821 border. With a touch of playful irony they asked, "What would Mexico and the United States look like if that boundary had been fully realized?"

The stops included places that the public usually doesn't conceive of as part of an international border, such as Oregon, Wyoming, Nevada, Colorado and Kansas. ERRE says, "We call the project a guerrilla-style intervention, mainly because we did not ask for any permits to plant the obelisks in the public and private spaces (along the route)." Yet many of the people that the artists met along the way immediately understood or at least respected the artistic intent, he adds. They

