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Despite the Hardships

Powerful works make UAMA's uneven 'Border Project' worth a visit

By Margaret Regan

Seven years ago, when hundreds of thousands of Mexicans were pouring into Arizona, American photographer Paul Turounet walked the borderlands.

Unlike the migrants, he stayed on the Sonoran side of the international line. His mission was to photograph the travelers on one of the most important days of their lives—the day they would leave their country and cross into *el Norte*.

Turounet gave them small Polaroid portraits as a memento. For himself—and for us—he made large black-and-white pigment photos on gleaming aluminum. These wrenching, gorgeous images, tacked to a grim swath of the real border wall salvaged from San Diego, are a highlight of *The Border Project*, the sprawling exhibition now at the University of Arizona Museum of Art.

The 11 photos in his "*Estamos buscando a/We're Looking For*" capture both hope and fear on the faces of the travelers. A woman named Joseline smiles in anticipation as she rides in the back of a pickup, but her little girl, sitting next to her, looks puzzled. Why, the child must wonder, are they leaving their home? The dusty young men resting in a desert shelter seem equally worried, with good reason.

That year, 2004 into 2005, at least 282 migrants were found dead on the other side of the border in the Arizona desert.

Turounet's pictures confront some of the dangers of the trail. A makeshift migrant grave, covered with stones by fellow travelers, is in one. A bra is strung out across prickly desert plants in another, a sign of the brutality that's another risk of the trail. Migrants report that smugglers who rape women leave their bras behind as a trophy—and a warning.

The work is steeped in art history. Turounet gave his pictures the look of 19th-century tintypes by printing them on aluminum, linking them to portraits of the immigrants who arrived a century ago on ships from Europe, dressed in rags and as desperate as the latest arrivals. The metal, the artist notes, also conjures up Mexican *retablos*, the religious folk paintings on tin painted in thanksgiving for safe passage through danger.

All by itself, Turounet's wonderful piece makes this uneven exhibition worthwhile. Co-curated by four UA people in different fields—UAMA curator Lauren Rabb, art-history grad student John-Michael Warner, musicology professor Janet Sturman and English professor Jennifer Jenkins—the show is meant to be about the rich, shared culture of our borderlands. But it's literally all over the map, without a coherent narrative or even guiding principle.



click to enlarge
"Baja Arizona," 2011, acrylic on wood panel, by Melo Dominguez and kids from the Holmes Tuttle Boys and Girls Club on 36th Street.

The Border Project: Soundscapes, Landscapes and Lifescapes
9 a.m. to 5 p.m., Tuesday through Friday; noon to 4 p.m., Saturday and Sunday, through Sunday, March 11
University of Arizona Museum of Art
1031 N. Olive Road
\$5 adults; free for children, military and UA students, faculty and staff
621-7567
Also: Visit the website for information on numerous related events and lectures

Tucson Weekly arts editor Margaret Regan reports on the arts twice monthly on the *Buckmaster* show, which airs from noon to 1 p.m., Monday through Friday, on KVOI AM 1030. Her next radio report will be on Tuesday, Jan. 24.

The printed gallery guide doesn't help. It's a turgid piece of academic writing so wrapped up in theory that it forgets about the living—and dying—human beings this show is supposed to be about.

The history section is so small, it only confuses the complicated past. The few objects standing in for centuries of history are given almost no context. It's hard to know what to make of the sword from Tucson's Civil War days, or of the abacus left behind by a Chinese immigrant long ago.

Instead of halfheartedly evoking the past, the organizers should have stuck with the present. They've certainly gathered up good examples of the wild art being produced in the borderlands today, a delicious hybrid that's part pop culture, part art history and part political rage.

Dozens of artists contributed work in every medium imaginable. There are cyanotype photos printed on tamale papers (Annie Lopez); paper hand-made from desert plants framing a passageway for the desert's dead (M. Gabriela Muñoz); a clever print of a saguaro as a prickly Statue of Liberty (May Hariri Aboutaam); a furious manipulated photo of the Virgin of Guadalupe as a cleaning lady (Carlos Encinas).

Fragments of "Paseo de Humanidad," the metal artwork by the Sonoran art team Taller Yonke that once hung on the border wall, is suspended on the façade of the architecture building across from the museum. Inspired by Mayan and Aztec imagery, along with contemporary Mexican folk art, its metal figures run across the desert, trying to flee death.

Many artists critique the border wall that scars the landscape and pushes migrants to their deaths in the wilderness. (Early numbers for fiscal 2012 suggest that border deaths are up again, after a dip last year.) In a 2008 photo by Scott Hopkins, a dime-store piñata hangs on the old barbed-wire border fence near Sasabe; that flimsy barrier has now been replaced by a 16-foot-high metal monster. Julie Anand and Damon Sauer dispense with the border wall altogether in their "Border Crossing," 2008. They've shredded their photo of the barrier slicing through the land, and woven the pieces back together, blending north and south into a single place, undivided.

Some of the most-interesting works, like Turounet's, give a face or voice to the people living in the borderlands, or trying to get here. Luis Alex Levy's "Gateway," 2011, an eloquent soundscape in Spanish and English, layers the voices of a dozen people into a mesmerizing oral symphony that mourns the ruptures created by the international divide. (The words are also written on a placard inside a sound booth where visitors can sit and listen.)

A Mexican woman living in the U.S. laments the loss of her family. On brief visits home, she says, she "soaks up" her beloved parents and siblings. A U.S. poet speaks sorrowfully of the borderlands, where "some lives we value / some lives we take." An American woman recounts how bird-lovers flock to see border-crossing birds, whose arrival is celebrated and cherished; not so, she notes, the border-crossing humans.

Similarly, M. Jenea Sanchez videotaped the passengers in a van traveling north to Phoenix; their stories demonstrate the unbreakable social ties linking north and south. (The riders are apparently all documented—they pass successfully through a Border Patrol checkpoint.) A Mexican woman explains that she prefers home, but she must go to the U.S. to care for her ailing mother. A man bound for California says his whole family is in Sacramento, where's he lived for years; a quick trip back to see friends in Nogales, Sonora, made him realize how much America is now home.

Lopez's tamale-paper piece examines the duality of a hyphenated life. A well-known Phoenix artist, she says her Mexican-American family has been in the U.S. for 120 years. Still, when she was a child, she tried to hide her identity.

She uses the fierce Arizona sun to emblazon her childhood pictures onto tamale-wrapping paper, a nod to the Mexican nana who used a *Good Housekeeping* recipe for her tamales.

Blending the images with text that's deliberately difficult to read—an echo, perhaps, of the multiple languages she heard in childhood—Lopez writes around the pictures, "I allowed people to think I was anything but Mexican."

That remembered hurt could serve as a warning for the current immigrants starting a new life in a brave new world. So could Aboutaam's angry Miss Liberty cactus blocking entry into Arizona, and Alfred Quiroz's metal death head warning of desert dangers.

Still, despite the hardships, despite the hate, despite the dangers, today's immigrants have the same optimism that

yesterday's did. In one of Turounet's pictures, you can see that undiluted hope in the luminous faces of a married couple. The photographer captured them lit up by the sun, just moments before they climbed the wall and struck out north into the Promised Land.

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