

Borderland / Stills and Motion

A Supporting Paper

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Border Landscapes

A transparent segment of a brick wall overlaps a desert landscape; an imaginary wall interrupts the space. The apparent obstacle lets us see through the scenery as far as the eye can see, as far as the horizon. The clear structure lets us scrutinize the border predicament under the crystal lens of a wall. Carlos Fuentes analyzes the immigration dilemma in his 1995 novel *La Frontera de Cristal*, *The Crystal Frontier*, where discrimination, violence, racism and sexuality are the main subject of his short stories.

The history of the representation of the landscape by the Spanish in the Americas and the British in the United States has a predominant colonial position. Expeditions to the American continent frequently included artists assigned to describe the topography for military and proprietary purposes in a pictorial way. The image of the American landscape was not a contemplative one it was a statement of power and ownership. Graham Hood in his essay *America the Scenic* talks about the British military need to chart the new terrain in the American landscape.

In order to attempt to comprehend the current political problems regarding immigration, race, and identity I traveled to the United states-Mexico border, to document the aesthetics of the borderland landscape. Arid and rugged, the landscape is divided by a man made scar that snakes through the topography in fragmented sections from west to east along the continent. The political character of

this open wound materializes in a wall with sentiments of nationalism, protectionism and absurdity. The borderlands are the representation of the uncertainty of a region that belongs to someone else, a stretch of land that attracts and repels us at the same time because the abrasive political talk that surrounds this extension of land. For some the borderland is the destination, for others the region is home, for many is a temporary condition.

In my work imaginary alternatives to a wall are suggested overlapping sketches, drawings and diagrams over landscape images. These proposed projects are simple possibilities to an already heated political conversation. The intended site projects forecast a completely different outcome to an anticipated wall plan. In my images, tables, shelters, and tunnels are part of a new syntax in the lexicon of usual border concerns. What would happen if people from different backgrounds and cultures encounter a long table instead of a wall? Would we sit and converse? Would we share a meal? Would people jump over the table as an obstacle and keep on with their journey? How about if we encounter a tunnel or a bridge or a shelter? Would we find commonalities or differences in a given space? What would be the risks of communication and involvement with a different culture or community?

Specimen, Trophy, Emblem.

Nations have adopted and poured symbolism to animal figures, specifically the eagle as a symbol can be found in indigenous and state imagery. The eagle has been used

in heraldry as a symbol of power and strength; it is depicted with certain attributes, specific positions and attitudes.

I documented two sets of specimens, three *Haliaeetus leucocephalus* and three *Aquila chrysaetos*. The Bald and the Golden Eagle serve as national devices for the United States and for Mexico. Courage, strength and immortality are some of the attributes that these two nations have poured into the animals and adopted these qualities as their own.

The documented specimens are not alive, they lie inanimate resting in trays, catalogued and archived in drawers. The implanted nationalistic symbolism has the potential of being removed; the display of these specimens has a representation of its own. When the images are displayed horizontally in a table they work as specimens, when they are displayed on the wall they take the position of trophies or emblems. Their empty, cotton eyes make evident the presence of loss.

The Blindfolded

With a stick or a baseball bat in their hands four Latino men stand blindfolded waiting for their turn. Their posture is menacing and their attitude intimidating but the blindfold makes them seem vulnerable.

These images borrow attributes from the allegorical representation of justice *Justitia*: a blindfolded female figure that is balancing a scale in one hand and with a

sword in her other hand. But more than impartially implementing justice these characters seem to want to take justice.

Stills and Motion

A woman hesitates to walk on stage, pauses, and then proceeds to the front of a theater. As she approaches, the microphone anticipates her arrival. After scrutinizing her surroundings, she appears to be ready to talk or sing, she clears her throat, she is ready but an insistent dry cough is persistent. In spite of the difficulty, she seems determined to continue. In the following film, a young man acts confrontational, provocative and combative. A conflict is about to start. He walks back and forward, left to right. His body language is one of a creature that is cornered, with no escape but to be aggressive. His anger seems to be increasing. His movements resemble the pacing of a caged animal.

A couple dances, we can see how eloquently their dance steps are, their polished shoes gives us the impression that this is a special occasion. As the dance progresses we notice that one of her shoes has lost the high heel, but regardless of the absence of that portion of her shoe they keep dancing. There is an evident struggle but they continue to dance disregarding the annoyance.

A *Charro* (Mexican cowboy), covered completely by colorful balloons, struggles to ride a horse that doesn't want to cooperate. Eventually he dismounts and proceeds to cut the strings that hold the balloons to his body. As they are released and float away, a heavy burden that the *charro* bears is lifted.

Another *Charro* in the film segment “Reluctance”, attempts to move a horse out of the mud. The main character’s intentions are unclear and the persistent pushing and pulling of the horse and the confusion of his intent helps to develop discomfort throughout the three minute long film.

My final project consists of five different films running continuously in a loop. Each film will add information to the consecutive films about desperation, defeat and determination of the Latino culture in the United States with the purpose to tell a more comprehensive story. An aggressive character would have to live in the same space as a passive one, an action will be paired with an inaction, all of them balancing, harmonizing or opposing one another.

In addition I will display film stills from the projected films in a linear sequence. These will provide the audience with the opportunity to take a closer look at images that are not time-based, that are still but, I believe, have much to say. Some of the film stills taken from the same motion film will be put in chronological order to give a cinematic impression. These sequences will take back the appearance of the moving image that was taken from them when they were made into stills.

The film vignettes are brief evocative representations of actions and an attempt to answer personal questions about Mexicanness or Mexicanidad. My intent is not to describe what Mexicanidad or Latinidad means nor do I feel qualified to make an assessment, a judgment or valuation of a whole culture. The purpose of these short

narratives is to try to comprehend why we behave a certain way: What are the inherent peculiarities of our conduct when confronted with existence or reality. In order to analyze these personal observations and questions, I film and re-photograph the footage. I make short narratives and abstractions. The end result is a series of films and photographs that help me understand the Mexican enactment. (The representation of performing out a situation or character that becomes more real than fiction). To help the viewer observe this conduct closely, I have opted to stop the motion of the moving images, print them in a large scale and arrange them in a chronological way so they reference a cinematic sequence. The image arrangement will make allusion to cinema and the cinema will reference the still images.

When an event is captured on motion picture film at 24 frames per second, time is fragmented in each frame. When the filmstrip moves through a lens and the film is projected with the help of light, this action gives us the illusion of movement. The human eye retains an image for just a moment and that afterimage is fused with the next image to create the impression of motion.

We can stare at that fragment of time and analyze it in detail when mechanical movement has been stopped. One of those moving images becomes still, motionless, without sound. That image with scars from being forced to move through the projector has become a film still.

I compare the illusion of movement produced by a strip of film projected through light to the illusion of cultural identity. The idea of culture is often a fabricated idea of what we believe is culture. Culture, an entity in motion, is always evolving, imitating, recreating and reproducing itself. I make short 16mm films in an attempt to analyze culture and its characteristics. From those films I extract film stills in order to take a closer look at certain peculiarities that surround the Latino culture and to examine its multiple layers. The use of 16mm film in this project has the unavoidable risk of falling into a nostalgic discourse and having a formulaic and old fashioned look for contemporary times. The evident film grain, the colors, the scratches, the film flare at the end of the reel and the possibility of slowing down the motion at a 32 frames per second gives us a very specific character that can depict a sense of times past. The quality and aesthetic of a film can often provide the look and feel of a moment in time by providing a suggested impression of reality, a true experience with textures and contrasts that enhances the richness of the images. In contrast, the pristine, scratch-free video image can be cold and distant and has the capacity to give the notion of a sterile or clinical appearance. 16mm film has the ability to reveal the visceral reality that assists the film's syntaxes to tell the stories of Mexican idiosyncrasy.

The films, without incurring the melodrama symptomatic of Mexican culture, challenge the notion of success, predominant in American culture, that dictates: *"You can be anything you want to be, if you just try hard enough."* The ones who triumph are celebrated even when they lack any talent. The Mexican counterparts

have a less optimistic view of life, their reality is permeated with negative and cynical doubts about existence. Their everyday life has apparent monumental obstacles that are accepted as ordinary. Without sustaining a deep sense of failure, my films attempt to portray common themes in Mexican culture: disappointment, machismo, melancholia and disorientation.

Mexican idiosyncrasy culture and history

Mexican writer and philosopher Samuel Ramos commented in 1934 that Mexicans have an inferiority complex. That is why, in an attempt to escape reality, they seek refuge in fiction. The popularity of short stories in Mexican pulp novels and *foto novelas* are rooted in real social, political and economical struggles. Soap operas are inspired by the hopes and dreams that TV networks assume that we have. *Lucha libre* (Mexican wrestling) is based on notions of good and evil.

The Mexican archetype dismisses reality and substitutes his or her attributed genuineness with a fictitious character: an ingenuous one. The character becomes his/her reality in everyday life. Doubt and uncertainty mark their path but life becomes more bearable if the character is represented in a convincing way every day, everywhere and at all times. This fabricated character becomes real and authentic.

Mythical and historical figures are central to Mexican culture, from pre-Columbian, indigenous figures to historical war heroes, to contemporary characters in cinema

and comic strips. In my work I make direct reference to those figures, I replicate them and make them perform in situations of anxiety, frustration, and desperation. The extreme anxiety portrayed by individual characters is not fabricated just for a film, it emanates from my own awareness of individuals that I personally know, that I have observed in the street, family members, friends and strangers that reenact characters and adopt these types with common characteristics as part of their personality. These representations become part of their individual truth and are shared publicly without restrictions of theatricality.

In the southern states of the U.S. the figure of *El Pachuco* appeared in the 40s after the second World War. *El Pachuco*, a character represented by young Mexican-Americans, is an example of “one of the extremes that a Mexican can arrive at”, according to Octavio Paz in his collection of essays *El Laberinto de la Soledad*. Young gang members assumed the *Pachuco* character in order to make visible and tangible their differences from American society, a society that marginalized them and their families. With their own particular vestment, language and behavior, these young men enacted a persona that was distinct and helped make a statement to be different and stay different from the surrounding dominant culture. Almost 60 years later the *Pachuco* figure is adopted by the Latino culture as a nostalgic and romanticized character that speaks about a fabricated identity of youth and rebelliousness.

The *Pachuco* evolved into what is known as the *Cholo*. Similar theatricality is put in to practice. The vestment, colors, signs, symbols and language codes in *Cholo* culture are different from the *Pachuco*, but the need to reenact these characters is still prevalent in our youth.

Even as manifestations of rebellion and change, strong roles remain intact.

Traditional Mexican society is characterized by strong male and female roles. These strict roles are challenged everyday by a Mexican society that tries to rewrite its history with comprehensive and inclusive characters and role models yet hyper masculinity and hyper femininity are constantly reenacted. These roles are emphasized and highlighted in music, television, cultural personalities, news about drug cartels and political drama. Media help accentuate the artificiality of the roles and people play these parts in everyday life.

By no means am I attempting to define Mexican culture or trivialize their behavior. With this series of films and film stills I am simply attempting to poke into Mexican nationalism and analyze some of its manifestations without re-inscribing stereotypes.

The recurrent symbols or motifs that I use in my films rely on archetypes (individual character), not stereotypes (an oversimplified general character). From a selected archetype I construct a character, and the character performs an action that seems meaningless, but the characters and their actions are charged with challenging

layers of complexity. The temperament of the young character in the film *Contretemps* is a mirror of nonconformity for the Latino population. There is no clear indication on why his attitude is aggressive, his rebellion is a reaction towards a feeling of submission that Latinos have throughout centuries of oppression from the Conquista to independences and dictatorships to everyday corruption.

The Anti-Hero

The anti-hero is a character that is morally ambiguous, who has flaws, who is inconsistent, who has a dark past, who doesn't play clean, who is going to try to accomplish whatever is on his/her mind under any circumstances, who is unrepentant. Because of the many odd individuals that I personally know I have a fascination for this type of character. In many cases the anti-hero is much more interesting than most traditional heroes. Imperfections make a character human and relatable. The roles played by everyday Mexicans support a reverent culture for the anti-hero. The undocumented, the disloyal, the unfaithful, the treacherous, the deceitful are characters that we perform. Most of the characters experience a double life, good and evil. Parts of this dichotomy are brought out to the surface or are hidden recurrently on a regular basis.

We love them and we love to hate them as well. Throughout popular Mexican consciousness there is a genuine attraction to the antihero, the villain, the bandito, both male and female. Mexican political characters, historical personalities, eccentrics, fabricated characters, *Luchadores*, *Narcos*, movie stars and saints are part

of the immense glossary of characters that Mexican culture embraces with enthusiasm. The origins of representation of the Mexican anti-hero date from the pre-Columbian period and have been present throughout Mexican history: *Chucho el Roto*, *Pancho Villa*, *La Malinche* to the contemporaries *La Reina del Pacifico*, and *El Chapo Guzman*.

Mexicans live within the strain of overestimation and underestimation of self, in order that the self-denigrating attitude doesn't appear as such. With these rough calculations of self, Mexicans have to conceal, hide, disguise, dress and mask this position with defiance and self-glorification often with performances and pantomimes.

The characters in my films lack heroic attributes; the anti-hero is displayed in a way that can be relatable to the viewer without falling in sentiments of compassion or sympathy. There is an urge for the character to succeed but there is also a feeling of redemption in to the circumstances that is removed from sentimentalism.

The film portraits explore a range of human experiences and individuals that, for the purpose of the films, have formed a radical persona that inscribe the iconic and the absurd.

The social, cultural, and historical implications of such archetypes might seem simplistic but I believe that there is a deeper analysis behind each character. We

make an extraordinary effort to avoid weaknesses to appear evident, and it is necessary to cover them and dress them with a display of anger or masks of folklore, never with the acceptance of defeat. The films prompt questions that remain unanswered, behind the mask of frustration and anger there is a general sense of guilt. In the Mexican figure there is most of the time an image of implied offence or crime that we are constantly fighting.

Mexican soap operas and Mexican politics have an overall predictability in their plot: we can easily guess the outcome of the story, the well defined characters are either good or bad, there is no half way point in the behavior of these individuals. When the bad repent they turn immediately good and when we find out dark secrets about the good they instantly turn bad. In Mexican culture there is a constant rotation of heroes in which we pour all our hopes and dreams just to see them fail and fall over and over again. With the same devotion that we place in the predecessors of these heroes, we wait for the next possible lead protagonist who will promise to guide us to better times just to see them fall again.

I strongly believe that certain aspects of Latino and Mexican culture are ambiguous and nostalgic: a sense of defeat is present in the culture but at the same time the will to overcome defeat is also there.

A number of immigrants have a deep sense of nostalgia of their country of origin, reminiscence of the land of their ancestors, melancholy and longing of better times and the locality where we grew up, a place where a myth gives birth to a hero

that will come and provide everything that we have lost and will restore all our misplaced self-assurance. A hero that looks like us, that is human, has flaws and commits the same mistakes that we would do if put in a desperate situation.

The Film look

The characters in my films perform in a film-look atmosphere and cinematic, theatrical ambiance. I have asked myself the same question repeatedly: what does the film quality add or take away in the scenes? What does a film-look have to offer in contemporary art? Is it too nostalgic? The answers to those questions are still unclear to me and rely on the audience. The grain, the occasional film flares, the imperfections, and the editing remind us that we are looking at a representation, not the actual "truth". It is nearly impossible to forget the medium of film while watching a moving image. The vehicle that helps us tell a story is still present at all times. When the story gives the impression of being real or compelling enough to steer us inside the fiction, we let ourselves be driven by the film, we might ignore or overlook the fact that we are watching a film and we accept the farce and dive in it only to be rescued from the tale when the film ends.

Art and Life

In contradiction to the statement that Aristotle offered, "Art imitates life", Oscar Wilde proposed in his 1889 essay *The Decay of Lying*, that "Life imitates Art far more than Art imitates Life". Latinos, Mexicans and Chicanos reside in this discussion without taking sides and without providing a clear answer. The constant

reenactment and mimicking of art with its comedy, tragedy and drama overwhelms and exhausts everyday life just as it enables every new day. The constant flood of soap operas and news that Mexican culture has to endure every day sets the tone to reenact the fictitious character where he/she seeks refuge.

Jorge Luis Borges' one paragraph fable titled "On Exactitude in Science" narrates the story of a country obsessed with cartography whose inhabitants elaborate a map with the exact dimensions of its territory. The next generations without the same enthusiasm for cartography abandon the map to the inclemencies of the weather and the whole empire surrenders to time and abandonment leaving only the remnants of the enormous map as memory of what the empire used to be. The map is so exact that it is confounded with the actual terrain.

The simulacrum within the fictitious character of the self-imposed Mexican archetype is so precise that the representation gets mixed with reality and the limits of veracity get blurred.

I attempt to construct characters with the qualities and substance of the original. I make an effort to make the characters real, display them as real persons, as characters that we can encounter in the street, which can be your neighbors or your relatives, a simulacrum that is identical to any person. It is played with devotion just as it is played in every day life. Reference never ceases to exist. Film and photography are fundamentally representational, symbols and signs are constantly

used and should be treated as such. Symbols allude to real situations and real actions. They are not only mentioned, they have their reflection in reality and they are an indication of certainty. The films are representations of the simulacrum, they are not the simulation itself but only a representation.

To simulate is to pretend to have something we don't have, to assume a character or a persona that has a different aptitude or ability. Jean Baudrillard states in his essay *Simulacra and Simulation* that in simulation, the differences between "the truth", "the false", "the real" and "the imaginary" are unrecognizable.

Various audiences can interpret the allegories differently. A Latino audience might have a different understanding of the information on the subjects than the mainstream U.S. culture; academics might have a different view of the form and history and interpret the material in a different way. The themes are as specific as they are universal. The devotion that cultures have for anti heroes is not particular to the Mexican or Latino culture, the attraction to play characters is widespread, and the importance to reenact situations is common. The themes and frustrations are comprehensive to many cultures and societies. I don't expect the audience to be sympathetic or understanding with the characters but there is the possibility of finding common ground or be self identified with the characters.

Film is escapism; it is the copy of a copy without any original. Reality and cinema play a mirror in which the two stare at themselves in an attempt to scrutinize each

other and compete in a contest of authenticity. My films don't attempt to reach reality but to reach verisimilitude. They try to appear true or real based in real conceptions.

It is essential for an entire nation to question itself and reaffirm its differences from the rest of the world. Self-examination in Mexican culture often takes the shape of humor and caricature as self-critique. Jose Guadalupe Posada makes an assessment of Mexican culture with satirical acuteness of his the working and political elite in his cartoons and prints. Octavio Paz in his book *El Laberinto de la Soledad* analyzes this questioning and voices his concern about Mexican behaviors. Roger Bartra in his book *La Jaula de la Melancolia*, retakes the theme of character display and the need for fallen heroes. Contemporary Mexican visual artists also interrogate similar aspects of their practice. Visual artists like Abraham Cruz Villegas, Dr. Lakra and Gabirel Orozco utilize materials with Mexican characteristics but they use an international language to produce art and conceptualize the information. Their art is not overtly Mexican. Mexicanness is not mention but they use resources that have Mexican connotations.

Gordon Teskey dissects the etymology of the word allegory in his book *Allegory and Violence: Allegory from allo "other" and agoria "speaking"*. The interpretations of the word are infinite: am I speaking about the other, or speaking as the other, or portraying the other as a mirror of myself. When I explore the idea of Mexicanidad, I am the other and I am a singular part of the whole cultural Mexican notion with its

perception of loss and restless search for identity. My film and photography work persists between ideal and pragmatic always questioning what is real and what is ideal, what is expected and what is deliberate.

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