

Borders: Separation, Detention, and Dehumanization

By
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Borders: Separation, Detention, and Dehumanization

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Abstract:

Borders: Separation, Detention, and Dehumanization is an exhibition that calls attention to the worsening situation at the southern border. The show is composed of large paintings and drawings, depicting scenes of either separation or detention, and an element of human suffering portrayed by deformation or ambiguation of the human form.

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Background

I was born in a small rural town in Mexico, called Villa Insurgentes, that lies on the border between the state of Durango to the north and Zacatecas to the south. As a teenager, my father started working as a seasonal worker in the US and would eventually gain citizenship thanks to the Reagan administrations amnesty. I was only a couple of years old when our family permanently moved to the US. Afterwards we would make frequent trips back and forth to visit family.

The experience of regularly passing through the border and seeing the stark contrast between one side of the border and the other, as well as the constant fear of detention have continued to linger in my thoughts to this day. Initially we would cross illegally, as we were over-staying our visas, and the coyotes (individuals specializing in helping people cross the border) were still fairly trustworthy. The border had not yet become so heavily militarized and the stakes were much lower. Even after obtaining legal status and eventually citizenship, the extra scrutiny by uniformed officials and racial profiling was taxing, and the constant paranoia of being detained for one reason or another was palpable. Unfortunately, things have only continued to deteriorate.

Call to Action

Now more than ever it is critical to call attention to the continued physical and emotional hardship imposed on individuals and families by the militarization of the border. It is difficult to remain uninformed of the humanitarian crisis unfolding across the globe, but specifically to our south. The constant stream of both accurate and inaccurate news stories creates a drastically polarized environment in which what one chooses to believe is almost completely dependent on

their political ideologies. Responding to this, artwork is uniquely suited to dispel the polarization by reminding the viewer, through visual language, that empathy for the suffering being inflicted on these individuals should supersede any consideration of politics. By being confronted with the reality of issues such as child separation and detention, a militarized border, and federal agencies increasingly being found guilty of criminal behavior and deaths, the viewer is no longer able to push away their willing or unwilling participation in this tragedy. When the viewer reflects on their participation, through our tax dollars, voting record, community behavior, speech, financial investments, etc., it is my hope that they will be moved toward positive action.



Children in cages

Many artists have also been inspired to pursue this subject matter. Some of these artists are carving a path through innovation and new media, while others employ traditional methods, yet all are moved to action by compassion and a desire to create. Oscar-winning film director Alejandro G. Iñárritu shares a similar intention in his work, he says “There’s a moment when your identity shifts a little bit and you lose the ability to rationalize what you’re experiencing and

that's the beauty of it: you start reacting with your heart and your emotions and not with your brain. That's what I'm interested in.”¹

Using Narrative and Abstraction

In telling a story about immigration there is the potential for a meta-narrative of the human experience. The issue of immigration is deeply entangled within the structure on which Western society, possibly Eastern society as well, is built. This interconnected quality of immigration lends it to become a global conversation that can relate to any group. In an article in *Art Papers Magazine* titled “The US-Mexico Border: Place, Imagination, and Possibility” Chelsea Weathers describes some ways in which the border generates meaning, “...it is at once a geographical location with particular sociopolitical concerns such as migration and commerce, a conceptual place that inspires innovation and longing, and a region rife with potential for utopian futures.”²

Anyone who has lived as an immigrant can immediately place themselves within the context of the narrative. The desire for a better life and the resolve to complete the journey are well known even to non-immigrants. *Borders: Separation, Detention, and Dehumanization* focuses on the hellish experiences that are being hidden and or diminished as necessary and humane by those in power. The stories of the people and their experiences are layered between the cognitive dissonance created by the media on one side, and the imagery revealing a cruel reality on the other. The same might be said of various locations around the world which have or

¹ Ruiz (2017) *The Virtual Reality of Crossing the US-Mexico Border*

² Weathers (2018) *The US-Mexico Border: Place, Imagination, and Possibility*

are experiencing a mass movement of people in one direction. The motivation and people might differ, but the lack of humanity is the same.



Detention followed by separation

As the artist, I am asking through the work, are you ok with this being done on your behalf? What can we do to correct this tragedy? Have I been contributing to their experiences? In terms of my own development as an artist, I am also investigating how visual art can function as a service to others. *Borders: Separation, Detention, and Dehumanization* will hopefully also serve to inspire other migrant students that their voices can reach privileged spaces such as a flagship university art gallery.

Painting can harness a duality of perception which creates complex narratives. The imprint that a painting leaves on the viewer can be of a second nature as well, a historical record. As difficult as it is to imagine someone with no knowledge of the issues surrounding

immigration and borders, it is quite likely to be the case in the distant future. From the accounts of individuals, I am guided toward the development of authenticity of experiences, which in turn informs me of appropriate visual language, such as color choices, relevant locations, scenarios, and emotions that make up the content of the paintings.

Abstraction of faces, bodies, and environments is utilized to protect individual identities and experiences while staying truthful to reality. The visual similarity to newspaper clippings and journalist photography becomes a means to take something which many individuals have become desensitized to and aims to re-sensitize the viewer through a re-interpretation of the imagery. The viewer is forced to confront their understanding of what is being referenced by means of a heightened reality, one that is just as real, but lies beyond the superficial facts. The unnatural skin tones and disconcerting palette of the paintings convey a complexity of emotion and identity that is strongly contrasted by the clarity of the suffering in the drawings.



Perilous journey



Alone, a hundred miles from home

Borders: Separation, Detention, and Dehumanization is made to act as a recording of events that captures the human element in a unique manner that mediums such as photography cannot. Painting uses formal qualities to heighten the viewing experience in such a way as to offer additional levels of meaning and interpretation. A compassionate intention facilitates a connection between the mind and brush, allowing the paint to achieve a language of its own. As Julie Heffernan states in the article “Drawn to the Body,” “People want to be seduced by a work of art, and if there is something behind it, some real substance, then there is a payoff.”³

Each painting is an opportunity to converse with society as much as myself. Through the combination of abstraction and representation, images can be both specific and ambiguous, personal and universal. Some work may lean more toward one side or another, but aspects of both are always present in the work. The complexity of the subject matter when activated visually, allows for layered meanings, and personal interpretations that can become another means for interacting with the work.

³ Gomez (2004) *Drawn to the Body*

The absence of color and use of unrealistic hues convey a disempowered and surrealistic state of being: of anger, pain, fear, and a general sense of distress. As someone who has lived through similar experiences, I can attest to the feeling of color draining away from the world, of feeling incomplete or ghost-like. In some cases, I am painting myself and my experiences as much as those of others, and the line between the two is often blurred. It is important to note that while any immigrants and Mexican-Americans would likely appreciate my work, it is my hope that those opposed to immigration and blind to the suffering they may be causing to others are the ones that are most affected.

Working Process

At times, painting requires relinquishing control, and navigating the canvas purely on intuition. During these moments it is impossible to predict an end result, one action leads to another, in a string of cause and effect, and the canvas becomes an embodiment of the unconscious mind speaking with the conscious. The result of this type of process is an image that blurs the separation between artist and subject matter.

The experience of painting is itself a major reason I choose to paint. For me, painting provides a never-ending challenge, to create a balance between formal qualities and content by working in a spontaneous and expressive manner that requires bodily presence and mental immersion. To maintain an emotional connection and an objective artistic awareness simultaneously, is akin to a deep state of meditation or shamanic ecstasy. Any imbalance present will quickly cause your hand to betray you, your eyes to be unable to see, your mind unable to imagine, or your judgement to be unreliable, and the resulting work inert.

I find myself drawn to this struggle in that it mirrors my own spiritual practice. Taking aspects from Catholicism, Tibetan Buddhism, Shamanism, and various esoteric traditions, a practice of self-refinement and discipline through virtuous acts, such as meditation and prayer, I can aim to accumulate merit and a state of being that can be adapted to artistic practice. A painting can then become a meditation, prayer, devotion, affirmation, or internal journey whose merit can be offered toward a specific person, peoples, places or situation while still maintaining a secular tone. This is particularly appealing to me because it offers a vehicle for change that is not passive and does not have the potential to do harm, aggravate a situation, or mislead others. For those skeptical of what sending invisible energy (merit) out into the world can achieve, they need not look any further than to observe people looking at art, and how they can walk away with something they did not have walking in.

Conclusion

The act of making art, has itself become a form of rebellion against the life I could have been forced to live, one that is consciously inflicted upon a fraction of the global population by a remorseless hegemony that forgets, that they too, were once immigrants. Working in a factory, making barely enough to make ends meet until retirement, is not the life my parents and the parents of many others struggled to provide for their children.

I am obligated, not only by my conscience, but also by the sacrifices of my family and my fellow immigrants, to strive to make the best use of opportunities largely paid for by the blood, sweat, and tears of others. I choose to do this by making oil paintings, which I dedicate through *Borders: Separation, Detention, and Dehumanization*, to the alleviation of the suffering of migrants of all types and the improvement of their living conditions.

Works Cited

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