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Photographs capture life on the border

By Andrew Junker, The Catholic Sun
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SCOTTSDALE — Hundreds of 4x6 photographs hang on a stark, white wall in the Scottsdale Museum of Contemporary Art.

One picture shows the face of a middle-aged Mexican standing in the open desert. Next to it, a photograph of a white man, holding a pair of binoculars, scanning the same stretch of land.

The photographs, part of the Border Film Project, represent the newest voice in the immigration conversation.

"Immigration is just a crucial issue, an issue that has become incredibly politicized, an issue that we wanted to re-humanize," said Brett Huneycutt, an organizer of the Border Film Project and graduate of Brophy College Preparatory.

To "re-humanize" the debate, Huneycutt and two friends purchased thousands of disposable cameras and distributed them to migrants preparing to cross the border illegally and the Minutemen who hoped to stop them.

The series of photographs documented everything from beautiful Sonoran desert landscapes to lonely water jugs set up by humanitarian groups, to the American flag-adorned jeeps of the Minutemen.

The pictures offer a glimpse into a world that most Americans know only through the lens of the media.

"Both the Minutemen and migrants are often caricatured," Huneycutt said. "The Minutemen are caricatured as gun-toting vigilantes. The migrants are caricatured as people who come to take advantage of welfare or steal American jobs. I don't think either caricature is reflective of reality."

Marilu Knode, senior curator at the museum, said the photography exhibit has helped break down those caricatures.

"We think the audience recognizes the commonality of human experience depicted in the photos. Being more open, allowing conflicting opinions to exist is important for all of us in this complex world," she said.

Allowing the photographs to speak for themselves was important to Huneycutt. There is very little textual commentary attached to the exhibit. The artists stenciled some facts and statistics about the border on the walls surrounding the space.

There is no text inside the enclosed exhibit, however, only the work of the amateur photographers.



Courtesy Scottsdale Museum of Contemporary Art

Border Film Project handed out cameras to Minutemen and immigrants preparing to cross the border illegally. Their photos are on display at the Scottsdale Museum of Contemporary Art.

**If you go:
The Border Film Project runs until Jan. 28, 2007**

**Scottsdale Museum of Contemporary Art:
www.smoca.org**

"The project could potentially be more effective in shaping people's views if we didn't say anything overtly political. We kept our own voices largely out of the project and let the migrants and the Minutemen speak for themselves," Huneycutt said.

Knodel agreed.

"Throughout the process of organizing this project we were careful to preserve the human face at the heart of the Border Film Project. And we feel the audience has understood that by their reaction," she said.

Getting both sides to participate in the project proved difficult at first, Huneycutt said. Both groups were initially wary of his intentions.

"I think we were most successful when we gave out the cameras ourselves and convinced both the migrants and the Minutemen that our intentions were good just by hanging out with them," he said.

Both sides were also apprehensive about the other group's involvement.

"But on the other hand, they were incentivized to do a better job," Huneycutt said, noting that on occasion he told the Minutemen that the migrants were sending him much better photos to spur the Americans on.

Another issue was purely technical. Many of the migrants had never operated a camera before. Huneycutt and his partners had to teach them proper flash usage and other rudimentary skills.

All this effort drove the Border Film Project into debt.

"We were pretty convinced that we were going to fail and took on a lot of credit card debt," Huneycutt said. "But now that it's rolling along, the project has paid for itself."

Huneycutt intends to publish a book of the images and has scheduled the exhibit at various universities. A museum in Houston will host the photos in the near future.

Placing the exhibit in upscale art museums has allowed for a diverse audience, Huneycutt said.

"I think it's good that it's in a museum in Scottsdale. I think it will bring people of very different opinions to the same space," he said, adding that he hopes "both migrants and Minutemen will come to the exhibit and have to be in the same room together."

Knodel said the audience has been both diverse and attentive, opening themselves up to both sides of the debate.

"I feel the audience response demonstrates the best of our American cultural inheritance," she said.

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