

The Border Film Project: Scottsdale Museum of Contemporary Art.

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Exhibited recently in the form of an installation at the Scottsdale Museum of Contemporary Art, Rudy Adler, Victoria Criado, and Brett Huneycutt's Border Film Project, 2005-2006, is a flexible, transportable civics infomercial, presenting two polarized sides of the explosive issue of border control in post-Patriot Act America--a war of bodies and language. Developed with SMOCA curator Marilu Knode, the project exists--and can be viewed with almost equal effect--as a website and as a color spread in *Good* magazine; it will also soon be published in book form. Since its first full presentation last June at the Lied Education Center for the Arts in Omaha, it has succeeded in generating debate about border issues in media outlets ranging from Fox News to the Huffington Post.

In 2005, Adler, Criado, and Huneycutt (whose backgrounds include activism, economics, and advertising) began distributing disposable cameras and stamped mailers to people on "both sides" of the border debate: the illegal immigrants who cross the southwestern border of the United States (at the rate of 700,000 a year) and Jim Gilchrist's right-wing vigilante group, the Minuteman Project. Both groups were asked to document their activities and were offered different incentives for the return of unprocessed film. Minutemen received \$25 Shell gas cards, while migrants were given \$25 Wal-Mart gift cards. If this sounds like a marathon game of extreme paintball, the pictures do not belie the idea.

While the work's creators cautiously cast their endeavor in the pseudoneutrality of humanism--seeking, as they write on their website, borderfilmproject.com, to "capture the humanity on both sides of the border"--what hangs on the walls of the museum is a classic depiction of Might vs. Fright. Though none of the photographs in the project are captioned, their sources are readily identifiable. Middle-aged white men dressed in camouflage and wielding binoculars, video cameras, motion-sensor equipment, and walkie-talkies are depicted leaning against SUVs. Clearly representing Team Migrant, young men in gray-market sneakers and jeans huddle beneath the scant shade of cottonwood trees clutching gallon jugs of water.

Beyond the desert, the backdrops and props are equally polarized. On the Mexican side: rutted dirt roads, images of the Virgin of Guadalupe, cots spread out in safe houses, busses, group meals; on the US side: American flags, parking lots, KOA campgrounds, night-vision goggles, guns. Similarly, in a twenty-minute video, Minutemen invoke shards of rhetoric ("job loss," "health threats," "terror," and "homeland security") to explain their mission, while migrants speak in the first person: "My family is poor and they need help." Nowhere does the project suggest a causal relation between first-world wealth and third-world poverty. Clearly, these are not "individual stories," as the website suggests. Rather, they function as allegories.

The most polemical (and poetic) aspect of the SMOCA installation is a curved, dimly lit wall designed by the architectural team of Luis Ibarra and Teresa Rosano, which visitors are required to pass through. In the labyrinthine space beyond, a zone of quiet danger, voices are hushed and footsteps echo. Experienced in this context, the project's imagery suggests an absurdist but deadly accurate inversion of American myth. Guided only by hand-drawn maps and their wits across a dangerous landscape, migrants are America's last pioneers, their journeys evoking those of Melville's "outlanders" and the stories of James Fenimore Cooper.

Producing this show in the extreme right-wing atmosphere of southern Arizona, where elected officials like Sheriff Joe Arpaio seek to prosecute migrants as felons, took courage on SMOCA'S part. In this context, even presenting the migrants as "human" is, remarkably enough, an improvement. Still, the Border Film Project continues to invite questions about how issue-based art can transcend the reductive language of civics.