

Zoe Leonard at Captain Petzel

AF artforum.com/picks/zoe-leonard-88331

Critics' Picks

Zoe Leonard, *From the Puente Colombia, Looking Downstream*, 2017/2022, gelatin silver print, 26 1/2 x 37 1/2".



**Capitain Petzel
Karl-Marx-Allee 45
March 18–April 16, 2022**

A flowing river is also a body bearing witness. Over the past five years, Zoe Leonard has followed a river with two names: Río Bravo and Rio Grande, photographed over a stretch of 1,900 miles along the border of the United States and Mexico. The series also has two names, “Al río / To the River,” and comprises over five hundred black-and-white silver gelatin prints and approximately fifty color C-prints. A sensitive exploration of the ideology of Manifest Destiny that captivated early American photographers—the idea that nature’s splendor was created by God for white American men—these images invite us to consider the natural landscape’s entanglement with human rights violations.

Viewers to this show initially see forty close-ups of the water’s surface (*Prologue*, 2017/2022). Nuances multiply from one shot to the next, the churning liquid’s thick folds, deep whirlpools, and cortical swirls picking up subtle gradations of yellow, brown, blue, and bubbles of white. These poetic abstractions are contrasted elsewhere with stark reminders of the region’s policed reality. Silver gelatin photographs, exquisite in their rich finish, portray bridges, fences, a white obelisk marking boundaries to patrol trucks, a desolate view over the levee. In *Untitled 2020/2022*, the thick black rails of a fence double as Minimalist sculptures, while in *On the Gateway to the Americas Bridge, Laredo*, 2019/2022, bold horizontals of concrete and razor wire carve the composition into a layered dermis of estrangement. Begun at a time when the Mexico–US border wall was central to Trump’s racist campaign for re-election, Leonard’s series charts

geographical and sociopolitical time simultaneously in her portrait of a borderlands riven with political tension, raising layered questions about which bodies are allowed to move freely amid such barbed beauty.

— Louisa Elderton