

Zoe Leonard's Conceptual Landscapes

Jessica Lynne speaks to the artist
about photographing the Rio Grande

JESSICA LYNNE I'm compelled by what it means to use photography as a material and a methodology, and so I thought it would be wonderful to hear you talk about what photography allows you to do, even though it's situated within the wider framework of your conceptual practice.

ZOE LEONARD I work with sculpture and installation but I would say that photography is my home base. Even when I'm working in other media, I think photographically. For me photography isn't limited to the process of taking pictures, it's a way of engaging with the world, a way of observing it. It's also a means to understand perception and subjectivity – understanding that how you see the world is informed by who you are and where you stand; not only your physical position, but also your cultural and social perspective.

JL What do you feel are the limits of photography?

ZL I don't really think about photography in relation to its limits, but rather how to use it to convey meaning and experience. I guess the limits of photography are fascinating to me and keep me in it, because I'm constantly finding a way around the next corner.

I think I'm wrestling with the nature of depiction itself. After working on 'Analogue' [1998–2009] for 11 years [comprising 412 photographs of storefronts and markets] – I thought I was done with photography. But instead, I started working on *You See I Am Here After All* [2008], composed of

thousands of vintage postcards of Niagara Falls dating from the early 1900s to the 1950s, arranged in an installation that reflected the photographer's vantage point in relation to the subject. So, I was still working within photography, but I didn't take a single picture. I was pushing into and getting traction out of the history of photography. Maybe that was when I started thinking more deeply about the role of photography historically in constructing conceptual landscapes. Our social and political understanding of this country, of this continent, of land itself, has been constructed, in part, through photography.

It pulled me back into thinking about how we define land as territory. How do we relate to land and water as resources for us to use? What is in the human imagination that sees a magnificent landmass and thinks: 'I can extract coal from this,' or, 'I can use this waterfall to make electricity'? There are ways that photography historically aligns with constructions of statehood – how certain places, mountains, rivers become symbols of nations.

JL That leads me to your recent work, *Al Río/To the River* [2016–22]: a large-scale work comprising of hundreds of photographs of the Rio Grande/Río Bravo. Could you talk more about what compelled you to turn your attention to the site of this particular river, a place that has become highly politicized?

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Zoe Leonard, details from *Al Río/To the River*, 2016–22, series of approximately 375 gelatin silver prints, 40 c-type prints and 30 inkjet prints, installation dimensions variable. All images courtesy: the artist, Galerie Gisela Capitain, Cologne, and Hauser & Wirth



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ZL I started this work with the question: What does it mean to ask a body of water to perform a political task? I was interested in looking at our human relationship to this river and what would be revealed through that observation. I began photographing in late 2016, shortly after the US general election. My idea was to follow and photograph the river along the 2,000 kilometres where it is used to demarcate the international border, from Ciudad Juárez and El Paso downstream to the Gulf of Mexico. I wanted to observe the complex nature of the river itself, the water as it winds through the landscape, but also to consider the built environment we've constructed alongside, into and across the riverbed. The photographs act as a kind of cross-section looking into situations where many different factors are active simultaneously. The work raises questions of immigration, commerce and trade, but also climate change, drought, water usage, wildlife migration and survival. Questions of food supply and labour politics. Policing and surveillance. Citizenship and belonging.

JL An invitation to think about what it means to be in relation with other living things and histories across multiple scales is something that I gleaned from the images



This spread
Zoe Leonard, details
from *Al Rio/To the River*,
2016–22



themselves, as well as the accompanying two-volume publication for the project, which includes contributions from numerous writers and thinkers. Across all the texts, this invocation of relationality, geographic time, place and memory is especially explicit.

ZL My collaboration with the editor, Tim [Johnson], became incredibly important to the work. From the beginning, I had conceived of the book as a companion to the work, rather than a catalogue. The idea was to invite writers, artists, thinkers and scholars in various fields to consider the river from their own viewpoints. The contributors were not asked to write about my photographs. Most weren't familiar with my work. Instead, we invited them to consider the Río Bravo/Río Grande on their own terms. Maybe this brings us back to the beginning of this conversation, this question of subjectivity and the possibility of multiple perspectives. In multiplicity, something else is created and there is room for overlap or disagreement.

JL Tim refers to your collective thinking and collaboration in the publication as a 'getting outside of the historical form of the encyclopaedic'. Can you say more about what this means as an approach to knowledge creation?

ZL For us, the key questions were: 'How are we going to do it? What is that process?' Our process was conversation, collaboration, observation. For me, it meant that there were a lot of photographs I wouldn't take or ones I edited out because I didn't want to align my point of view up with the sightline of government surveillance. I didn't ever want to photograph people in a way that felt intrusive or that established a relationship of authority. Finding a way and a place to stand that felt right took a long time and a lot of fumbling.

Making an artwork is about the how. What is the framing? What do you do in the editing process? In the printing? How do you present the images on the wall? I'm not an expert on rivers or borders. I came to this work as an artist, and with a certain awareness of histories of photography, and more broadly, histories of representation.

There are places along the Río Grande that are magnificently beautiful. The scale is enormous. But I don't want to continue along the lines of 19th-century depictions of the 'American West'. How could I find or make a different kind of picture? Often, I found myself working in a lower key. I wasn't looking for long shadows or dramatic moonrises. I was invested in finding another relationship to the landscape, to the river, to the animals

and inhabitants of this region. Many people in the US and maybe around the world, think of this border as one place. But the river is more than 3,000 kilometres long; it flows through many different places. The river traverses multiple regions and cultures, ecosystems and environments.

I tried to approach these complex situations by allowing for a variety of tempos and tones, through long and close looking, crossing back and forth along both sides of the river, photographing from multiple angles and distances. It was more than anything a process of appreciating and depicting complexity rather than trying to generate images that sum things up or reduce situations to single meaning. And that was on all levels: the photography, the editing, the printing and the book ●

Jessica Lynne is a critic and a founding editor of *ARTS.BLACK*.

Zoe Leonard is an artist. Her recent work *Al Rio/To the River* is on view at the Musée d'Art Moderne Grand-Duc Jean, Luxembourg, until 6 June.