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Crossings

by Yván Rosa

Tracing the Unseen Border**Group Exhibition****La MaMa La Galleria****6 East 1st Street, between Bowery & 2nd
Avenue, New York, NY 10003****April 21, 2011 - May 22, 2011**

The U.S./Mexican border, as much as it is a physical structure, is also an active force dividing, not just two nations, but socio-political and economic identities. At least this contention provides much of the impetus behind *Tracing the Unseen Border*, a group show now at La MaMa La Galleria. Centering its lens around the all too visualized, but rarely seen border that structures the lives of countless people, the exhibit provides a penetrating contemplation on the pervasive but rarely spoken conditions that this structure both signifies and configures.

An attempt to grab hold of the physicality of this contentious space reveals itself in much of the sculptural works. Blane De St. Croix, for example, presents a model of the fence line at Fort Hancock, Texas. The model, attached to the wall, hovers above the ground with several layers of stratification running underneath. It is as though the sectioned ground itself had been carefully torn from the earth. The miniature, with its fence, muddy river, and barren trees, appears delicate and fragile. The viewer hovers omnipotently over the landscape, which appears to be so easily susceptible to the effects of any human activity. The area comes through as a torn and wounded site, though nevertheless seeming so much more like an alive and breathing space because of its apparent fragility.

Ishmael Randall Weeks is similar in his intense and delicate attention to the particularities of the landscape. Whereas De St. Croix's model is effective in conveying the materiality of the site, Randall Weeks' approach is much more textual. Weeks in fact carves his three dimensional terrains out of books. Using a terrain map he recreates the mountains, hills, and valleys that make up the U.S./Mexican border. Though beautiful in its materiality, the work seems to be laying out, in an almost compulsive way, a preparatory and strategic study of the topography. Perhaps this is an attempt to reawaken us to the actuality of this space, which though constantly represented remains illusive and unknown. As far as his work inclines itself towards a textual survey of the terrain, its underlying motivation presents itself as an attempt at unveiling the facticity of these spaces while still being mired in textuality and overdetermined by representations.

While the physical structure of the border provides an anchor around which all of the works rotate, most of the artists are concerned not so much with the border as a site, but rather with the border as an active structuring mechanism. As such, their intentions are inclined towards registering the effects that this mechanism bears on those most directly affected by it. Various short documentaries and video works playing throughout the exhibition space chronicle the lives of immigrants and the relationships that this structure imposes. One short documentary by Alex Rivera records the weekend seaside meeting of a woman, her child, and her husband who lies on the other side of an imposing divide through which they caress, share food, and talk.

Judi Wertheim's *Brinco*, which consist of a pair of shoes designed by the artist, provides the wryest critique of the politics that pervade the border. The shoes were made specifically with the needs of illegal border-crossers in mind. The shoes themselves contain a map of the U.S./Mexico area, which is printed on the inserts, a compass, a miniature flashlight, and small storage pockets. Video footage of coverage by various news channels accompanies the work. Indeed, media hype becomes an integral part of the work that acts as a crucial dialectical tool. The fashion in which *Brinco* becomes just another target of news quip and hype seems to reveal as much about the state of the news media as it does about the way it views the border issue.

~Yván Rosa

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