



Borderline – An Overview

"In some places difference is celebrated, in others it is ostracized. In isolated events response to difference is generally a subconscious action, but in places where two differences meet, the product of actions is heavily contrasted against its execution.

On the border between the United States of America and Mexico two worlds meet. They could not be more different. The differences are so extreme that the region has become its own entity. Here people live in contrast, one cannot hide from it, but this is only because they are next to each other. Its existence is based on two livelihoods that live far apart, but who are dependent on each other in one way or another. It is the understanding and treating of the 'other' that determines a relationship as symbiotic or parasitic. This is best exposed where two worlds meet.

Borderline is the imaginary line where worlds meet. It is the divide between right and wrong. It is a wall of ignorance that has to be destroyed. It is the frontier that has to be crossed in order to make progress.

This is a chronicle by a person from a third world - an outsider to the environment, but a commoner to the conditions. This is a series of observations and thoughts extracted from a process, in search of a conclusion."

Photographically, *Borderline* analyzes the notion of surrealism in photography and the double reality created between reality, and what is perceived as reality in photographs. This happens to such a degree that viewers can *believe* that they have experienced an event by witnessing a photograph. Long term this leaves an audience numb to serious matters. This is most evident with images of war and suffering that have become commonplace in everyday life and are not recognized as traumatic anymore. The last thing that I want is a 'numb' audience so initiative has been taken to involve and provoke viewers to question the work on hand.

Another important element of the work stems from the fact that photographs are accurate to detail and not to truth. One knows what is visible in a photograph, but is left oblivious to the events, manipulation of events or people, and the photographer's reasoning in taking – and then choosing to present - *this* photo at *that* precise moment with *those* specifically chosen camera settings and positioning. If we do not have a 'numb' audience they are going to question such things, and so it is necessary to present a format that explains such technicalities so that the most accurate conclusions can be extracted from the work. This is ultimately a search for understanding.

Borderline is a unique perspective on a highly politicized part of the world. I – A South African by birth – noticed many similarities between the region and my homelands within moments of arriving in the border region of the USA and Mexico. But even with all of these similarities I was still a foreigner, and that was the first similarity. In South Africa I grew up as a *Mlungu* - a white South African, a half-cast African to some, and a foreigner to others. This title carries a dark history dating back to before my generation was born, but this reputation is difficult to shake wherever a *Mlungu* goes. In the Americas the title given was *Gringo* and it carried similar associations. But the difference was that it was not

related to South African history. So for the first time I walked as a foreigner but without the associations related to my bloodline. And so, with the appearance of an American, I experienced what it is like to walk in another's shoes for the first time. This provoked serious questioning of identity, mixed-culture environments and interactions between these entities, specifically to roles of power.

As I walked through the streets of Mexico observing that which was strange to me it became very evident that what I was seeing was not that strange to the people of the region, it was perfectly normal. What was strange to the region was me. This is the first element of the exhibition that is brought across. By capturing the stares and curious glances that the subjects direct at the camera (often with obscure scenery in the background) I remind viewers to recognize and place themselves in equations before making assumptions of a condition.

With documentary work and particularly documentary photography under constant criticism as to what is an accurate portrayal of events I decided to incorporate personal journal entries to the work to express my thoughts, opinions, and events that lead up to and after the taking of the photograph. By sharing personal accounts the work is contextualized by the impressions and experiences of an observer. Previous experiences, bias, contributing events, everything is exposed creating an as honest as possible platform to extract information. This style also leaves the door open for questioning, a preference I enjoy more than hard depictions of events.

The content of the exhibition looks at the dynamics of the region where Mexico and the USA meet. This is also the place where the developed and developing worlds meet, where conservatives and liberals meet, where Anglos and Hispanics meet. All of these and more make for an incredibly interesting location to view ethnographic activities. But it is also a transition point - a place where people come to go somewhere else and this too brings a dynamic that adds twists to the everyday functioning of such a place. There is the aspect of money, the USA has it and so it attracts people in search of money, making migration a major issue. Money also attracts drugs that has created the largest drug trafficking route in the world. There is also capitalist money. The border is dotted with *maquiladoras* or factories where goods are produced by a remarkably cheap labour force to maximize profits and assure cheapest prices to those living in developed countries. At a glance, with the thoroughly guarded border through the middle this resembled a globalised *Bantustan*.

When most people document the border region these are the stories that dominate the headlines. But there is another side to all of this. Amongst the people coming and going, immersed in the contrasts, and oblivious to that which is different to the environment they live in are communities that call this place home. It was to these communities that I was drawn. The challenges that the world considers extreme are their everyday reality, and they do not bow to them. They hold onto that which is theirs, be it identity or culture or physical goods and are proud of who and what they are. And this is not only present in Mexico or the USA. It is in both. And if it weren't for a place where these differences meet we would have nothing to compare them to.

This body of work is a study of the *other* by the *other*, which one are you? In the end this a small example of a global dynamic of which we are all involved.