

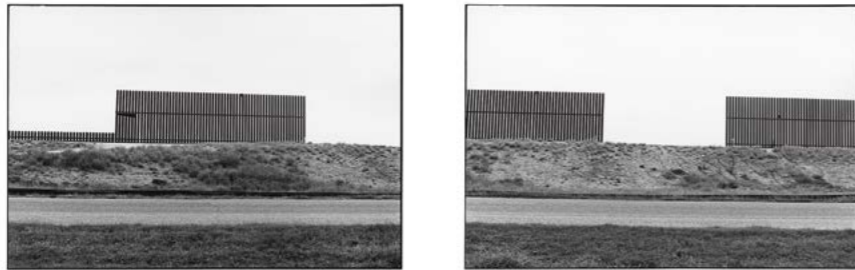
The Third Bank of the River

ZOE LEONARD
"A VIEW FROM THE LEVEE"
CAPTAIN PETZEL
18 MAR – 16 APRIL 2022

It was Heraclitus who said that you never step in the same river twice because both subjects of that sentence are unstable: the river is always transforming, and so are you. Zoe Leonard's photographs of the Rio Grande are commendable for confirming Heraclitus's assertion as well as flying in the face of it. Her photographic gaze is one wedged, impossibly, in between poetry and forensics. And so, like the river changes its name to Río Bravo as it crosses the border of the United States to Mexico, Leonard too exceeds the boundaries of individual perspective in her creation of a body of work that functions both as theatre and testimony.

The exhibition opened with *Prologue* (2017–22), forty colour photographs of the river's folds and ripples seen from up close. The series brought to mind the play on dimension also present in Leonard's earlier pictures of landscapes taken out of aeroplane windows; a consideration of the capricious relationship between scale and indexicality. If distance or proximity is one way of turning anything into a poetic abstraction, repetition is another. Seeing the same motif across forty instances instils a sense of doubt or relativity as to what is being seen, and questions the stability and reliability of the one who sees. Though the photographs are barely distinguishable from one another, they were captured across a distance of thousands of kilometres, a straightforward way in which the river is proven to be at once never and always the same.

Untitled, 2020/22, gelatin silver prints, each 42 x 60 cm



Hung on four free-standing walls arranged like dominos across the floor, *Prologue* was the dominating feature of the space. The title of the work, then, is another of Leonard's plays on proportion, while it also, quite literally, alerts the viewer to the relationship of narrative to time and space: how long it takes to walk the length of the four walls before we get beyond this false proscenium. In this way, *Prologue* performs the role of the river in the space, while the proper walls of the gallery are its banks. The reality portrayed in Leonard's work becomes contingent on the reality of the building we are in and its surroundings. By spatialising her narrative, Leonard makes of the viewer an empirical body who experiences the river as both content and form; an object of study in its own right as well as a carrier, or architecture, for other things.

These are the things that Leonard depicts in the photographs that follow the prolonged introduction: agriculture, infrastructure, and that famous border fence so many people insisted be built. These photographs come in two formats. The first, like *Prologue*, repeats the same motif, here only between two and five times, but hung behind the same simple plexiglass without a frame. In *From my hotel room in Laredo* (2019–22), it is white tarp-covered roofs; in *On the Gateway to the Americas Bridge, Laredo* (2019–22), barbed wire. These works have the quality of a witness to a place and its movements. The other format consists of single pictures in elegant steel frames. *From the Levy, Ojinaga* (2017–22) shows cattle grazing while a white pickup truck traces the picture's golden ratio. In *From the Puente Colombia*,



From the levee, Ojinaga, 2017/22
 Gelatin silver print, 67 x 95 cm

From the Puente Colombia, looking downstream, 2017/22
 Gelatin silver print, 67 x 95 cm



looking upstream (2019–22), our protagonist, the river, snakes majestically towards a vanishing point just perfectly left of centre. These are not documents, but compositions clearly based on classical principles. Their beauty marks them as fictitious and authored; one might even draw from them a romantic sense of hope or longing. The two formats each proclaim their own mode of truth: The serial pictures present fragments of a large and unruly reality, and while they

can lay claim to a certain objectivity, it is one that veers close to abstraction and illegibility. Meanwhile, the single pictures purport to hold the entirety of a

story within themselves, along with a kind of philosophical truth, made greater than the sum of its parts by being pushed through Leonard's artful funnel.

This skilful oscillation allows each mode to become self-consciously distinct from the other. This marks the exhibition with a cool authority, underscored by the poetry and humanity inevitably found both by chance in the document and by design in the composition. Even a highly politically charged motif such as Trump's wall is tempered by the unfaltering sobriety of Leonard's conceptual framework. All of it, however, comes back to that prologue: a rarely monumental and, paradoxically, solid ground for such a fluid, meandering subject.

Kristian Vistrup Madsen



Boundary Marker No. 1, 2020/22
 Gelatin silver print, 67 x 95 cm



By the Railroad Bridge, El Paso, 2018/22, gelatin silver prints, 42 x 60.5 cm (each)

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