

# Zoe Leonard Goes With the Flow

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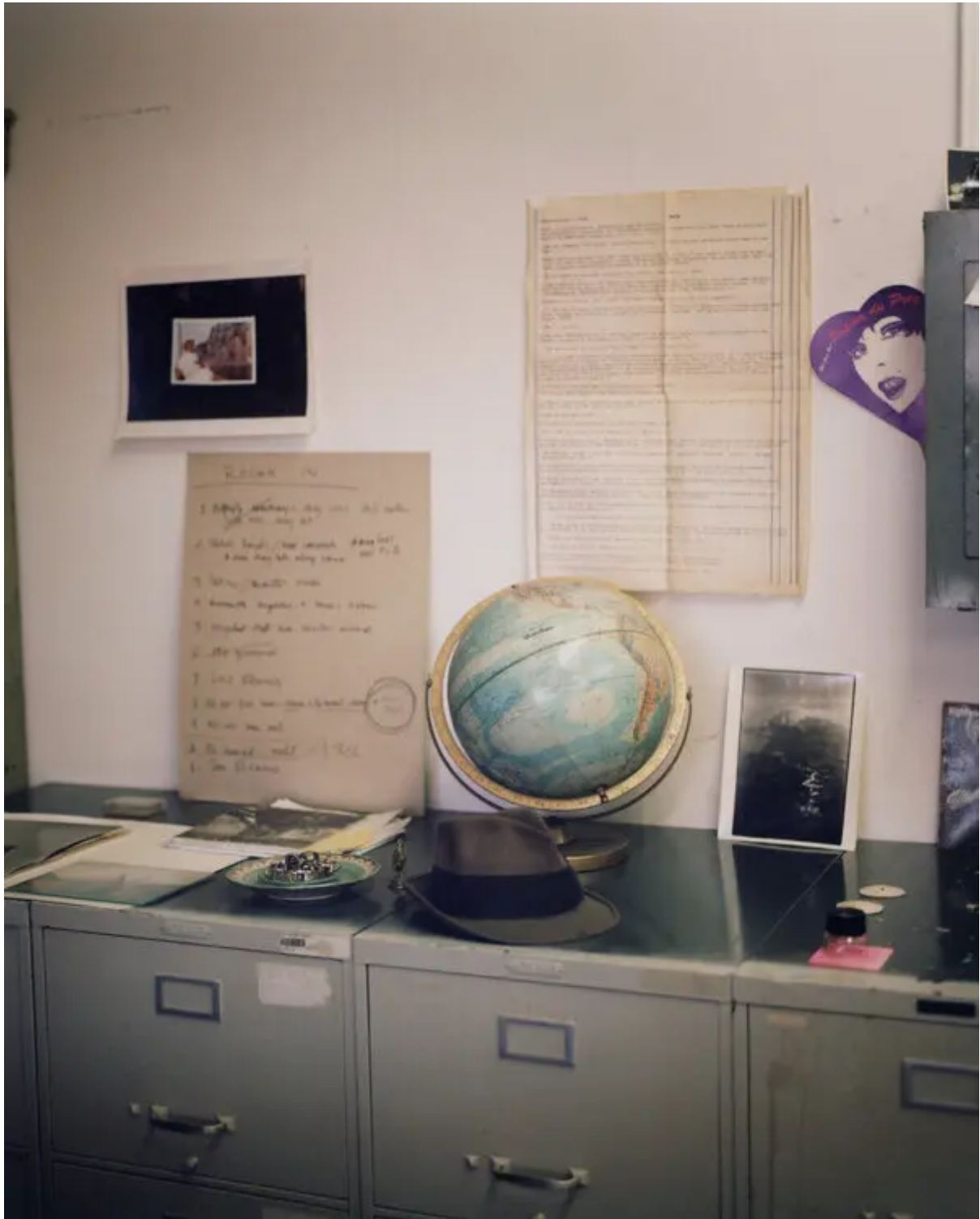
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Zoe Leonard was 16 when she dropped out of City as School, a public school in downtown New York designed, she says with a laugh, “for kids that didn’t do well with structure.” It was the late 1970s, punk was sliding into new wave, and Leonard and her friends, including the artist Jean-Michel

Basquiat, were, by Leonard's account, "wild little ragamuffin children." Taking pictures of those around her — of "people partying, hanging out" — she discovered a talent for photography that was initially diaristic. "I realized the camera and the notebook went together really well," says Leonard, now 61. "They were about being in the world and noting your relationship to it."

It's precisely this attentiveness that animates Leonard's newest project, "Al río / To the River," a collection of more than 300 photos that she took over the course of four years, beginning in 2016, of the river known in the U.S. as the Rio Grande and in Mexico as the Río Bravo — specifically of the 1,200-mile stretch that serves as a border between the two countries. An excerpt of "Al río" is currently on exhibit at Hauser & Wirth in New York, and, beginning in October, the series will be shown in its entirety at the Musée d'Art Moderne in Paris. It has also been published in a two-volume book of the same name, a collaboration between Leonard, the book designer Joseph Logan, and the poet Tim Johnson, who edited accompanying writings about the river by, among others, the poet Natalie Diaz, the environmental historian C. J. Alvarez and the art curator Nadiah Rivera Fella.



"I grew up super poor, so I was really used to being uncomfortable," says Leonard. "I thought, 'I'm not taking a big hit in my lifestyle by being a starving artist.'" Credit...Frédéric Georges



Some of Leonard's quilts, which she has collected from secondhand shops and eBay.Credit...Frédéric Georges

In portraying the Rio Grande, Leonard was determined not to reinforce American media stereotypes of the border, or of the immigrants who cross it. Instead, her photos, most in black and white, bring attention to the river as a natural force. The book opens with eight images of the water itself that Leonard took with a hand-held camera while standing on a rock, planning to capture a morning sunrise. Though the works are shot in color, the current's silt lends them a greige monochrome and Leonard's close proximity renders the patterns of the water — which swirls, froths and folds back onto itself — with a disorienting lack of scale.



“It can look mucousy,” says Leonard of the river in these images, “sort of oystery and delicious, but also kind of physical in a way that makes you a little uncomfortable. You’re not quite sure what it is.” Because of the photos’ ambiguity, Leonard conceives of them as “a palate cleanser” to help rid viewers of the loaded assumptions they may have about the project’s topicality.



Afternoon light illuminates Leonard’s studio, where mock-up prints from “Al río” hang on the wall. “I have an innate tendency toward repetition in my work,” she says. Credit...Frédéric Georges

People are few and far between in “Al río,” and often they appear in absentia, in photos of graves, tire tracks or a circling helicopter. Some are of U.S. Customs and Border Protection agents idling or perhaps lying in wait. With the deliberate exception of the book’s concluding pictures — photos Leonard took with her iPhone of publicly accessible video feeds from border bridge cams — civilians’ faces elude the camera. In one work, a man in a cowboy hat riding horseback is seen from behind, while in another, families frolicking on a riverbank are pictured only from a distance. The latter image is surprising for its mundane sweetness, a rare — to an American eye, at least — depiction of the river as a place of leisure. Other photos capture the riparian landscape, including the infrastructure — dams, walls, bridges, government buildings — that continues to proliferate.

While shooting, Leonard was acutely aware that she was under surveillance. How to avoid replicating that mode of observation was a question both ethical and formal. One answer was to use a 35-millimeter hand-held camera, eschewing aerial technology or even a tripod. “I don’t want an overarching mechanized or totalitarian view,” she says. “I don’t want authority.”



“I have such deep admiration for people who [make] art in all kinds of sets of circumstances, that are not traditional studio art,” says Leonard. She sometimes speculates about the circumstances that account for a quilt’s fabrics or pattern.Credit...Frédéric Georges



As a teen, “I didn’t want to be a photographer,” says Leonard. “The kind of photography that I had seen was journalistic or advertising.” Credit...Frédéric Georges

Though it’s easy to interpret “Al río” as a response to the 2016 campaign cycle that resulted in Donald Trump’s election, it elaborates on ideas of personhood and nationality that Leonard has long explored, most recently with “In the Wake” (2016), a multidisciplinary exhibit that incorporated family photos dating from World War II, which displaced her mother’s family from their home in Poland. That work saw Leonard contemplating photography’s contradictory ends, as embodied in “the difference between a family snapshot and an identity card,” she says.

Leonard knows firsthand that life, and art, can be politicized by circumstance. An early member of ACT UP, the grassroots group founded in 1987 to fight for the rights of those with H.I.V./AIDS, she observes that many still associate her most closely with the early 1990s, with “being an AIDS activist



and a feminist and making a kind of work that was considered political.” She doesn’t disown these identities or the art that reflects them, such as “Strange Fruit” (1992-97), an installation of dried and sutured fruit that drew on the tradition of memento mori paintings to mourn those killed by the disease. But, of course, she’d spent years developing her art before the AIDS crisis made political agitation feel necessary. “It maybe changed the trajectory of the kind of work I ended up making,” she says. “I began to understand that the way beauty was constructed, the way that visual information was constructed, the way that knowledge itself was constructed in our society was so inherently biased.” We spoke in September at her studio in Brooklyn’s Navy Yard. Below, she answers T’s Artist’s Questionnaire.



Leonard and her collaborator the poet Tim Johnson included a variety of contributions to the second volume of “Al río,” including a series of color maps from Texas Tech University that trace the Rio Grande’s evolution over time. Credit...Frédéric Georges

### **What’s the first piece of art you ever made?**

Ever made? That’s impossible. I honestly don’t know.

### **What’s your day like, and what’s your work schedule?**

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It really depends on what I’m working on and what stage something’s at. If I’m out taking pictures, that’s really determined by the light or the conditions that I need. If it’s a studio day, I usually wake up around seven, make a pot of really delicious coffee, walk my dog Buddy, then head here [to my studio] and I work a full day. Maybe I wrap up around five or six. Evenings and weekends I really try not to work. That’s for friends and for hanging out.

### **How would you describe your studio?**



It's big. It has great walls. The main thing is it has this wall of windows, so it has really great natural light. I really love the view. It's very workaday Brooklyn. I think we're facing southeast, more east. In the morning, there's very hard light. It's got these really cool floors, it's called end grain wood. They're really comfortable if you're on your feet for a while.

**When you start a new project, where do you begin?**

It's really different every time, but I would say it always starts from a place of the unknown. I'm driven by curiosity. Often when I finish a body of work, there's lag time and I don't really know what to do next. It almost never starts with a clear idea. I'll start taking pictures or I'll start collecting objects that interest me that end up going into the sculpture, but there's a period of time that's just very undefined. It's really led by instinct. I'm reading, I'm writing, I'm drawing, I'm taking pictures and then something sticks, something that's interesting. And then an idea. Then it gets more directed. I think maybe the most important thing for an artist is to have time to try a lot of ideas and make mistakes. That kind of freedom leads you to an idea that has precise contours. Boredom's really productive.



“I wasn’t too cool for school,” says Leonard. “I don’t know what would’ve happened if I’d had different economic circumstances and been able to complete college.” Credit...Frédéric Georges



“This water border is an antique way of dividing up political space,” writes the environmental historian C. J. Alvarez in the second volume of “Al río.” “In retrospect, it might have been a mistake to choose as a divider a desert river that moves like a snake across disarticulated land.”Credit...Frédéric Georges

**How do you know when you’re done?**



It's hard to describe. You really just feel it. It's often not what you thought it was going to be and it's not always what you wanted it to be, but at a certain point you're kind of listening to the work and that's it. You'll feel the drive, the urgency to work, leave you.

**What's the first work you ever sold and how much did you sell it for?**

I cannot remember. I remember the first work of art I ever bought, which was a little tiny Hannah Wilke piece for \$500 from Ronald Feldman Gallery. And they let me pay it off over time. It took me three or four months. I'd never had a lot of money and I'd always traded work with my friends. I had never thought of buying work, and it felt so good to me to demonstrate that commitment to another artist's work. This was in the mid-90s and I still have it. And [after that purchase] I started this "under a thousand" art collection.

**How many assistants do you have?**

I have one incredible person, Jocelyn Davis, who's worked with me for over 20 years. She works with me three days a week. When I can, I'll hire another person to help us finish a project. It's really great when we can have a second person, but it's mostly been me and Jocelyn.



"I wanted the whole project to be shot from a standing person's perspective," says Leonard. Credit...Frédéric Georges

**What music do you play when you're making art?**

I listen to a lot of soul from the '60s, '70s, '80s. A little Lucinda Williams. Sometimes I need to dance, but the soundtrack of the studio is NPR.

**When did you first feel comfortable saying you're a professional artist?**

I would never say I'm a professional. I just would never use that word.

**Do you talk to other artists?**

Yeah, a lot. A lot of my friends are artists. I belong to an artist collective called fierce pussy, and the current members are Joy Episalla, Carrie Yamaoka and Nancy Brooks Brody. We talk when we're working on something daily, [sometimes] multiple times daily, and sometimes we go a few weeks [without talking], but we're in touch pretty much all the time.

### **Do you make work collaboratively?**

We do. The collective, we call her the fifth artist. We're a group without a leader. The work that we make together is distinctly different from all of our [individual] work. We work more specifically on an issue or responding to what is happening in the world.



"Introducing a camera to a part of the world that has been so overrepresented but misunderstood is complicated," says Leonard. Credit...Frédéric Georges

### **What's your worst habit?**

There are so many to choose from. I often run late. I'm a kind of scattered person and I get anxious when I have to go somewhere and I make myself late. I'm almost always binge watching lots of really bad television

### **Like?**

"Matchmaker." All the classy stuff like "Succession" and "Billions" and better things, but also, like, "Nashville." And this show called "Girlfriends" with Tracee Ellis Ross. I'll watch anything with Tracee Ellis Ross.

### **What are you reading right now?**

I just got Lynne Tillman's [memoir] "Mothercare," but I haven't cracked it yet and I have to admit, I haven't had the focus to read full books in a while. I really want to get back [to reading] because it's something I enjoy. I've been reading a lot of shorter journalism and nonfiction essays that are related to the work that I'm doing. Rachel Monroe has been writing this really great short column

for The New Yorker online called Letters from the Southwest. She's done really beautiful reporting on Uvalde. I do read some poetry, although it requires focus. I just read Solmaz Sharif's "Customs," which is really incredible.

**What do you do to procrastinate?**

It depends how badly I don't want to do the task at hand. If I'm supposed to be doing something for work, I will suddenly clean my house and cook and grocery shop and whatever. And you know that if I get to doing my taxes, then I'm really avoiding. But if I'm avoiding housework, then it's like, suddenly I'm staying at the studio.

**What's the weirdest object in your studio?**

It's not weird, but maybe a surprising thing would be all of these quilts. [She leads me to two 10-foot-high metal shelves stacked with vintage quilts and begins spreading them out on the floor of her studio.] They're beautiful. I love textiles. Over the years, I've collected a huge number of vintage quilts. They're like thinking objects. They're artwork. There's intention and composition and sophistication. They work with the abstract language of pattern. They carry with them the history not only of the maker, but of the person whose bed they were on.

# The New York Times