

Interview with photographer Tom Kiefer: “This work is part of the historical documentation of our country’s response to migration”

El Sueño Americano: Exhibition of migrants’ items seized and discarded by US border patrol

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26 October 2018

El Sueño Americano: The American Dream—Works by Tom Kiefer, at the Saugatuck Center for the Arts, Saugatuck, Michigan, October 25–December 22, 2018

The remarkable German photographer August Sander (1876-1964) once suggested that he felt obligated “to see things as they are and not as they should or could be,” and to “speak the truth in all honesty about our age and the people of our age.”

That apparently simple program is both ambitious and difficult to execute. Most of the images currently circulating obscure or conceal the truth.

Photographer Tom Kiefer, born in Wichita, Kansas and raised primarily in the Seattle area, lived in Los Angeles for 20 years.

He moved to Ajo, Arizona—a town of 3,500 people some 45 miles north of the Mexican border—right after the September 11, 2001 attacks, seeking a lower cost of living and a place to develop his work as a fine art photographer.

In 2003 Kiefer needed to find a job to support his photography. He came across “an ad for a part-time janitor,” he told the WSW, “that paid \$10.42 an hour at a US Customs and Border Patrol facility. At that time, in June of 2003, it was a really good wage here in Ajo. I was going to be a janitor in my early 40s.” He worked at the job until August 2014.

Kiefer’s current exhibition at the Saugatuck Center for the Arts in western Michigan, *El Sueño Americano*, features more than 100 photographs of items—“everyday” and some deeply personal items—confiscated from

undocumented men, women and children caught crossing the US border.

The Saugatuck Center’s website explains, “The photographs and objects in *El Sueño Americano* first beg the questions: ‘Whose things are these? Why so many? Who collected them and why?’ Photographer Tom Kiefer also wants the viewer to ask, ‘What do I make of all this?’

“Kiefer ... discovered the items in garbage bags. Taken from people and deemed ‘non-essential items’ as part of the enforcement process, the items were bound for the dump. Kiefer was both intrigued and saddened by what he found in the garbage bags, and began making images of the items in an effort to answer his questions.”

The exhibition features images of “soap, wallets, and canteens and also rosaries, Bibles, and family photos. Taken together the items weave tales of the mundane, of survival, and of the elusive American Dream (*el sueño Americano*).”

Tom Kiefer recently spoke to the WSW about the project. “I made a decision that whatever time I had left on this planet, what I wanted to do was record life through my camera and I chose to photograph America.”

Norisa Diaz: How did you come to obtain these items?

Tom Kiefer: In 2007 I asked a supervisor if I could begin collecting the food that was being thrown away and deliver it to a food bank ... And I found deeply personal items like rosaries and Bibles, family photographs. That

was just not right. I was not going to allow someone's rosary or Bible to remain in the trash. I discreetly began taking them.

Kiefer collected items for seven of the 11 years he was employed at the station, noting that it took some time to determine how to showcase the objects. "Due to the inherent nature of what I was photographing, I needed to figure out a manner in which I could present the items in a respectful and dignified way."

Primarily a landscape photographer, Kiefer explained, "It was a good five years from the time I started collecting these items until I began photographing them. Even though I was an artist, a photographer, I didn't feel at first this was the type of subject matter that I was accustomed to doing, but on some level I realized that—my God, this needs to be done.

"I saw an injustice, how do you personally respond to that? It wasn't right to leave these personal items here. They would throw away a wallet with personal identification in it. Such highly confidential information, it shouldn't be something I find in the trash, from anyone—immigrant or not. I couldn't go to an agent and say, 'Hey, I found this wallet,' and it would be returned. This was the only way that I could document this."

Norisa Diaz: What conditions did you witness at these detention centers?

Tom Kiefer: The detention centers are there to dehumanize, to act as a deterrent for those entering the US unlawfully. It was my job to be as invisible as possible, but the whole manner in which immigrants are treated is unimaginable, the policy of separating families is truly inhumane and magnified in ways I couldn't imagine. That type of brutality is just abhorrent, it's just cruel!

Kiefer described a newspaper story he had read—about Adrián Luna, a 45-year-old Mexican immigrant who was removed from his entire world—wife, children, job and church in a small town in Idaho—as being typical of the fate of those who are deported.

"He was a model citizen, he had kids—just imagine being separated from your kids, your flesh and blood. He tried to return home to Idaho, but he died in the California desert.

"It's truly heartbreaking. The thing about these objects and personal drawings I've recovered ... these items made it to the bitter end, so to speak. They hadn't been discarded, they didn't fall out of a backpack, or were taken out and left behind because the backpack was too heavy. The people decided to continue carrying a votive candle or bottle of cologne. Who is to say these people

didn't decide to make the journey again and subsequently die crossing the desert?

"Immigrants are doing the dirty, degrading work in meat processing plants, agricultural field work, fast food, the hospitality industry.

"This work is part of the historical documentation of our country's response to migration. A pair of gloves from a *quinceañera* [celebration of a girl's 15th birthday], a family photograph of the kids, safety pins used for diapers—this is humanity and they are all profound objects that tell a story.

"I've been away from it for four years now. I resigned August 2014 and worked on finishing the project in 2015. However, it wasn't until June 2018 that the project took off."

Norisa Diaz: What's interesting and telling about the timeframe when you were collecting these items—it was during both the Bush and Obama administrations. Contrary to the claims of the Democrats, it hasn't just been the Trump administration doing this. Did you see any difference from one administration to the next?

Tom Kiefer: It was just really a steady increase in things getting worse. 2009-2011 were the peak years. The financial crisis stopped some of the flow. Even though the numbers of people were at record levels, it acted as a check and balance. The entire framework of these detention centers, this was a continuation and an escalation by each administration. What we need to do is educate and explain what is going on, that's half the battle right there. I've shown some of these pieces before and I can't tell you the numbers of people who have come up to me and are completely shocked: "Really, our government's doing this?" When will the turning point be? We are moving closer and closer to fascism, to tyranny and living under a totalitarian regime. This work is just my contribution to helping our democracy.



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