

CALIFORNIA STATE UNIVERSITY, NORTHRIDGE

ALIEN-NATION

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in Visual Arts

By

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To my mother, for always believing in me,

and

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ABSTRACT

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By Cintia Segovia

Master of Arts in Visual Arts

Photojournalism influences my work; it reveals the breakdown of social structures in different regions of the world that result from powerful countries profiting from low-cost production in developing nations. Photography allows me to point out the negative consequences created by economic interests in the United States of America and Mexico.

My work in video and photography exemplifies two key issues in the conflict between these neighboring countries: drug trafficking and illegal immigration. My video *Drug Cartels and 60,000 Dead* satirizes media's problematic handling of the drug war in Mexico, and points out the responsibility of the United States government in the conflict. Another source of tension in the border area of these countries is migration, and I explore this in my work; the U.S. government has created racist portrayals of illegal immigrants, reducing this population down to its physical characteristics.

Introduction

Two significant elements have greatly influenced my life: Mexican culture and the effects of mass media in contemporary society. I was born in Mexico and lived there until I earned my bachelor's degree in Mass Communication Sciences. This education made me aware of and sensitive to technological changes in media and how they are used for political and economic gains. Coming from an economically developing country to the United States, I identify with the disenfranchised; I am part of a majority that does not control the workings of the world.

As an artist from Mexico, I use photography as a tool to reveal the disparities of society. Brazilian photojournalist Sebastiao Salgado influenced me; he has worked in many countries around the world raising questions about the effects of globalization. I began to explore and question the situation in Mexico, one hand striving for progress while the other attempted to preserve a distinctly Mexican identity through customs and religion. After I moved to the United States, this conflict between progress, embodied by American ideals of consumerism, and traditional values heightened my sense of alienation.

My thesis raises questions about what it means to be American and is informed by the work of photographers Edward Burtynsky and Sebastiao Salgado, which investigates the struggle between globalization and unsustainable economic trade.

Photographic Commentaries on Market Trade and Economic Crisis

Photographers Burtynsky and Salgado use their cameras to open a dialogue with the viewer about the controversial and volatile subjects of consumerism, globalization, poverty, and social change. Both have different aesthetics: Canadian born Burtynsky uses wide angle lenses, large format cameras, and color film to portray large, anonymous groups of people working in order to create a general impression, rather than a specific story. Salgado uses a graphic, black and white approach with 35mm film; his photographs are intimate and portray individual people performing hard labor.

Burtynsky has been criticized for not taking a clear position on the intention of his images; does he want to condemn the degradation of the landscape and the costs of technological fetishism, or to celebrate the colors and shapes of his subjects? Some viewers see his work as a comment on ecology, while others simply appreciate his aesthetic. Salgado has been criticized for emphasizing the poignant beauty of poverty and putting aside the overt implications of social justice. Critics consider that this style of photographing misery around the world has reduced these communities to a level of generality and banality. However, making and looking at photographs are subjective experiences. Regardless, both Burtynsky's and Salgado's images engage viewers and generate a dialectic exercise that juxtaposes technology and beauty, production and consumption. Through their photographic essays, both photographers call attention to social situations in developing countries that produce goods for export.

From Sebastiao Salgado's point of view, the developed world produces only for those who can afford to consume, which is approximately one-fifth of the world's population. The other four-fifths, who might benefit from the extra production, have no means to become

consumers. As a result, the planet remains divided; one-fifth is in a crisis of excess, while the remainder is in a crisis of need, and at the end of the century the latter, built on socialism, is in ruins (Salgado). The poorer countries have transferred so many of their resources and wealth to the prosperous world that they have no way of achieving equality. When it becomes too expensive to make profitable objects in China, Bangladesh and Kazakhstan, as it inevitably will, when these three countries will have depleted their natural resources, what will be left for their citizens?

With regard to subject matter and composition, both Burtynsky's and Salgado's photographs provide nothing radically new or innovative, which makes them widely accessible and may be the reason for their projects' success. They no longer see the world as delineated by countries, with borders or language, but as populated by 6.5 billion humans living off the resources of a precariously balanced, finite planet. Essays, statistics, and news reports attempt to explain this precarious imbalance, but only a compelling photograph, perhaps one produced by Burtynsky or Salgado, will make this situation tangible.

Bite size reality

Mexicans use humor and satire as a tonic to soften the sting of reality. Throughout my college career, I have focused on mass media's impact on decision making with regard to political affairs in Mexico and the United States.

The violence in Mexico has increased since President Felipe Calderon launched "The War on Drugs"; clashes between organized crime groups have claimed many lives, and mass assassinations have become common in some parts of the country (Navarijo). More than sixty thousand people in Mexico have died as a result of this so-called "War on drugs." I question the value and veracity of news as a consumable product, as well as its efficacy to provide information, and I visually manifest my concerns by drawing on visual culture and using images from mass media that attempt to simplify reality and make it easily consumable. *Drug Cartels and 60,000 Dead* reflects the active role that television plays in the translation of stories into consumable products; its visual components emphasize the glut of information found in the mass media. The video has a performative component in order to exploit the means by which mass media and advertisements are delivered; I use this exaggerated visual language to expose the simplistic way complex topics are disseminated.

Television news in the twenty-first century fragments information into manageable pieces, employing simple narratives with mini-introductions, quick climaxes, and simple conclusions. News is recycled without resolution, leaving little to no opportunity for questions and responsible research. Today's news promotes the communication of a single idea and reinforces it at least twice to provide a makeshift conclusion. In the case of "The War on Drugs" in Mexico, the news media repeats that the killings, violence, and insecurity are the result of this

“War,” and television commentators are trained to modulate their voices and avoid passing judgment in order to more convincingly present “the truth.”

Mass media fabricates celebrity and promotes its superiority to common people; this includes individuals working in show business as well as those involved in commerce and organized crime. In 2011, the Mexican kingpin Joaquin "Chapo" Guzman was named by Forbes magazine as the eleventh most powerful man in the world; the same magazine also named Guzman to be one of the richest people on earth with an estimated fortune of one billion dollars (Forbes). This recognition has provided him with the admiration and fear of ordinary people. In February 2013, Guzman was named “Public Enemy #1” in Chicago (NPR). In response to this “celebration,” I produced *Drug Cartels and 60,000 Dead* to expose and comment on mass media’s idolatry of public figures, no matter the source of their wealth. News has two treatments, one produced for official discourse and the other distributed to the mainstream.

In the video, I appropriate the demeanor of a typical American or Mexican television news anchor and distort the boundaries of her on-screen behavior. In the performance, I improvise the facts to exaggerate the media’s subjective and selective treatment of “The War on Drugs” in Mexico. Visual elements, including bar graphs, logos, photographs and subtitles provide familiar distractions and disrupt the integrity of the narrative.

Mexico is known for its crime and its drug lords. The medias [mis-] management of this information has become reductionist and simplistic. The excessive use of graphics, my highly subjective and dramatic delivery, and the subtitles reduce the information into a more easily consumed product; my sarcasm attempts to acknowledge and manage my sadness about and frustration with this “media circus.”

Racism And The “Caution” Sign

I explore racism in the United States through the discourse of yellow, government issued signage found along Highway 5 near the Mexican border. These silhouette-laden signs tend to equate humans with animals and dangerous objects. Some caution signs warn drivers about potential animal crossings, including deer and kangaroo, while others alert commuters about the presence of hazardous materials and construction equipment. The sign seen near the Mexican border reads, “Caution” and bears the silhouette of a nuclear family running with urgency. This essentialist portrayal signifies an insidious racial profiling, the people portrayed having distinct features of Latino culture, including girls with braided hair and women wearing long skirts.

The series *Crossing* exploits the silhouetted features of these signs to restore a specific and more dignified humanity to the individuals. The color photographs portray twenty-first century suburban couples wearing contemporary clothing; they wade in a river that runs freely and has no boundaries. These portraits have been manipulated digitally the same way the sign is fabricated, and by altering the context of the silhouettes they create a new discourse. However a spider web in the foreground precludes sharp focus on the couple. Another photograph also uses shallow depth of field to portray a different couple running in the background of an urban landscape. The fleeing couple visually embodies the situation of any immigrant in a new country, legal or not; thousands of people leave their home countries for economic and political reasons.

Shallow depth of field, or optical blur, allows me to comment on mass media’s treatment of the current and restrictive immigration situation. This topic is often mentioned, but most discussions remain superficial and “out-of-focus.” The satirical approach to the signage

questions seemingly subtle representations of racism and the dearth of self-criticism within a contemporary consumerist society.

Conclusion

My work explores and questions my place as an educated Mexican woman in American culture. Somewhat enlightened by my cultural background, I use photography to draw attention to the disenfranchised majority. The artwork of Edward Burtynsky and Sebastiao Salgado informs my practice as I investigate the social implications that economic disparity has in third world countries. Their photographs acknowledge that the problems affecting these countries relate to the demand for goods by developed countries. Social inequality is a consequence of this global market and transnational phenomenon that responds to economic interests. My video *Drug Cartels and 60,000 Deaths* emphasizes the mass media's reductionist and simplistic management of information about the "War on Drugs in Mexico and the United States. Using the same language employed by broadcasting companies, I borrow their visual treatments as well as their anchor's subjectivity to remark on the media's manipulation of the news.

The fear of the other is sometimes manifested as racism. In the United States, the yellow sign on Highway 5 near the Mexican border portrays a distinctly Latino, heterosexual nuclear family. Informed by this sign, my artwork locates heterosexual and same-sex couples in urban environments at night. Out of focus and barely discernible, these running figures embody the plight of immigrants who try to blend into their adopted culture.

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Appendix



Objects in mirror are closer than they appear
Archival Pigment Print
16.5" X 16.5" 2011



Crossing California
Archival Pigment Print
16.5" X 16.5" 2011



Crossing California
Archival Pigment Print
16.5" X 16.5" 2011



Still from *Drug Cartels and 60,000 Dead*
High Definition video, color, sound; 3:26 minutes.