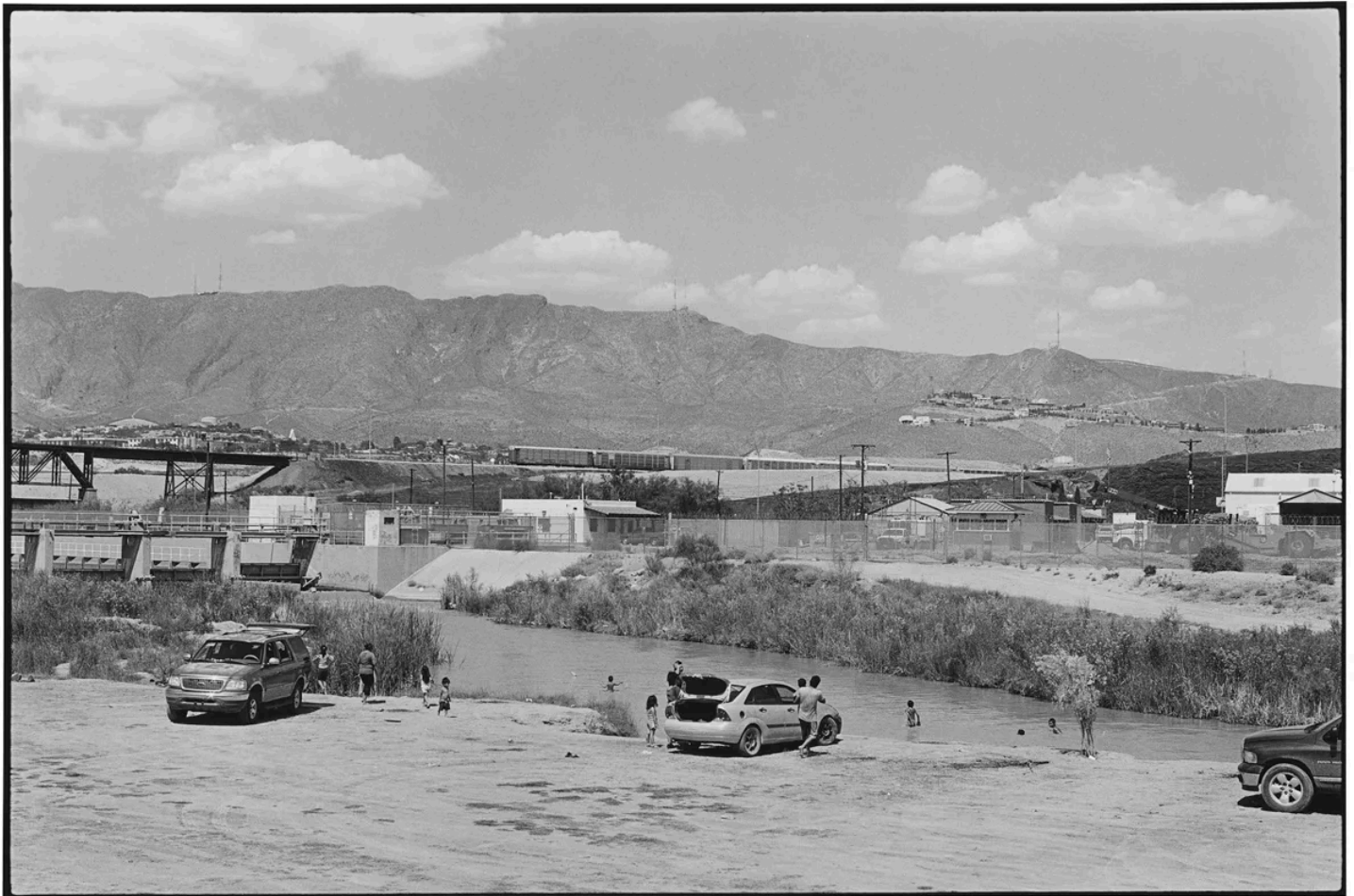


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Our Liquid Border: Zoe Leonard at Hauser & Wirth

By *Louis Bury*

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Zoe Leonard: From "Casa de Adobe, Ciudad Juárez" series, from the photo project "Al río / To the River," 2016–22.

Courtesy The Artist, Galerie Gisela Capitain, And Hauser & Wirth/©Zoe Leonard

Across **Zoe Leonard** (<https://www.artnews.com/t/zoe-leonard/>)’s wall-size grid of 34 photographs, “From the Los Ebanos Crossing” (2019/2021), a helicopter plays peekaboo with the viewer, changing positions as seen from slightly different ground-level vantage points. The grainy, black-and-white gelatin silver prints

depict the chopper circling above, and occasionally disappearing behind, a nondescript tree line. For the most part, though, the empty sky dominates the image, while the aircraft remains distant and mysterious. Given the project's subject—the Río Bravo / Rio Grande where it demarcates the Mexico-US border—one might assume the copter is engaged in surveillance. But these scenes from the artist's most recent project, "Al Río / To the River" (2016–22), are cryptic when it comes to interpretive clues.

Hauser & Wirth's concise presentation of Leonard's ambitious project does a lot with what seems like a little. *From the Middle of the Bridge* (2017/2022) shows a broom and dustpan leaning on a bridge's concrete barrier below a plaque, created by the International Boundary and Water Commission, that designates the Mexico-US divide. A suite of five images, "From Casa de Adobe, Ciudad Juárez" (2018/2022), depicts families frolicking in the river in the shadow of an arid mountain range. Another five-image suite, this one untitled (2020/2022), traces a flock of birds taking flight from waterlogged farmland. The solo shot *From the Puente el Porvenir* (2019/2022) centers on a lone tree separated from nearby buildings by the prisonlike bars of President Trump's infamous border wall. Though some of the works' titles specify geographic locations, the images themselves call attention to the topographical indistinguishability of the border's two sides and the arbitrariness of human territorial claims more generally.



Zoe Leonard: From the series "Al río / To the River," 2016–22.

Courtesy The Artist, Galerie Gisela Capitain, And Hauser & Wirth

The ruminative “Al Río” landscapes prove a welcome counterweight to sensationalist portrayals of the southern border. In particular, the scarcity of people feels conspicuous. Whereas US media images fixate, with muckraking pathos, on throngs of migrants, Leonard zooms out and situates her few human subjects as just some of many elements in the landscape, no more important or remarkable than the animals that dot some of the series’ other vistas. The human species makes itself known here predominantly through its material traces: architecture and engineering projects that appear alien to their desert environs; stray bits of trash beside the road; tire tracks left in the dirt. This interplay between presence and absence recalls the unpeopled landscapes of **Dawoud Bey** (<https://www.artnews.com/t/dawoud-bey/>)’s “Night Coming Tenderly, Black” (2017), a fictive reimagining of Underground Railroad sites, in that both series achieve narrative poignance, with conceptual economy, through compositional innuendo.

Leonard’s project also achieves this effect through her signature use of iterative display. “You see I am here after all” (2008), an earlier project not in this show, features 4,000 vintage postcards of Niagara Falls mounted on the gallery walls in gridded clusters by vantage point. The smaller image arrangements of “Al Río” have a more chronological bent, documentary vibe, and minimalist sensibility. Their

dramatic sequences register, given the vast setting, as blips in geological time. Leonard's aesthetic restraint, her willingness to stand back and simply frame the environment, demonstrates quiet confidence in her artistic abilities. It also evidences her caution regarding the all-too-human political complexities our species imposes on one river in the Southwest.



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