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Photographing the Border: The Landscape Behind the Politics

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Faint trail, Granitic Mountains near Raven Butte.

Credit Photographs by Mark Klett

For some, the border between the United States and Mexico is a conflict zone, a place to be secured by border agents and barriers.

But for the photographer Mark Klett, it is a landscape to be appreciated in all its hardscrabble, durable beauty. His series of images, “Camino del Diablo,” or road of the devil (in an exhibition at Pace/MacGill Gallery), offers images from the historic path running through a part of the Arizona desert into California. They capture a landscape with a severe, sweltering climate, largely unchanged over hundreds of years.

In this place, Mr. Klett said, he found “the collision of history, beauty and terror.”



Unexploded ordinance, Goldwater Bombing Range.

He was drawn to the area by a book. Raphael Pumpelly, a geological explorer, chronicled his travels on El Camino del Diablo in an 1870 book “Across America and Asia: Notes of a Five Years’ Journey Around the World.” For Mr. Klett, the book was “a great read because of his adventures — they’re entertaining and he’s a great writer to boot.” In Mr. Pumpelly’s time, the territory was often lawless, and terror, or at least danger, came in the form of white settlers, Mexican laborers or Apaches.

Mr. Klett made some visits in the 1990s, after his first reading of the memoir. At that time, he said, the road “was a dirt four-wheel drive track” through a desolate stretch of the Sonoran Desert. Once he was “approached by a man on horseback, a Mexican national looking for his cows that had wandered across the border. It was a more porous line in those days, usually a fence with just three or four strands of barbed wire.”

But not today. When Mr. Klett started taking pictures for “Camino del Diablo” a few years ago, the area had shifted since his earlier visits. “The road had changed a lot due to toughened border enforcement,” he said. “The initial track had been widened to accommodate Border Patrol vehicles passing on a regular basis.”



Tire track on virgin desert.

And with a military presence — the Barry M. Goldwater bombing range, which has been there for decades — the atmosphere, much more than the landscape, produced anxiety. “The combination of ongoing military exercises, the border enforcement and the signs of immigrants and drug smuggling, the published deaths by exposure to the extreme summer temperatures, added to the feeling of a militarized zone,” Mr. Klett said.

The tension in the air, he said, “conflicted with the beauty of the land.”

And Mr. Klett came upon some objects that emphasized the differences between a 21st-century and a 19th-century trek on the path: “live bombs and rockets, bales of dope, villages made out of shipping containers used for war games, people crossing in air-conditioned vehicles, cold beer.”

But Mr. Klett did share something with Mr. Pumpelly and previous generations who passed through: “The light at the beginning of the day and at the end, the color of the sky and the extremely clear air, cactus, the last glow of the sun as the darkness covers the land, and the eerie quiet of the night that comes with the blackness of a new moon — these are all part of the experience that is just as striking to me as it was to Pumpelly.”



Saguaro before sunset with shadow and moon.

“I took from him an appreciation for the beautiful in spite of any human threats or degradation to this place.”

In this extreme and dangerous climate, Mr. Klett pointed out, people survived because they knew how to live sustainably, and because they worked together to weather the harsh temperatures.

The desert landscape fits into our ideal of the American West in images, Mr. Klett noted, which “shows a fascination with wildness and beauty.”

Yet often, when it comes to the actual landscape rather than to pictures of it, “we have become so disconnected to place that we too easily value economic convenience over a more sustainable future. And in the political sense this is what leads us to do things like cordon off one of the most wild and striking places left in the southwest to use as a bombing range because we don’t think of it as otherwise useful, or to build two story fences for hundreds of miles to try in vain to keep out our neighbors.”



Slight track with red clouds at dusk, Copper Mountains.

Still, Mr. Klett said that, like Mr. Pumpelly in the 19th century, he is also optimistic. “The Camino was a dangerous place in 1861 and it can still be, but it’s a place that has survived every assault that has been thrown at it by travelers over the centuries and its harsh extremes will insure it will survive our present day occupation as well. It’s a place Pumpelly was grateful to experience, survive and leave. I feel the same way, but I’m planning to go back.”