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FIELDWORK: MARFA PRESENTS

ELISA LARVEGO SALT CEDAR

Elisa Larvego, Abandoned shirt on the way to the mexican border, Candelaria, Texas, 2012, 60x 70 cm

OPENING: FRIDAY, OCTOBER 4TH, 6-8 PM
EXHIBITION FROM OCTOBER 5TH
TO NOVEMBER 4TH 2013

FIELDWORK: MARFA GALLERY

open from Friday to Sunday

from 12am to 2pm & from 4pm to 6pm

212 East San Antonio Street, Marfa, Texas
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Fieldwork Marfa Permanent Exhibition

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GENÈVE



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Candelaria (USA) is a village of about one hundred inhabitants, including almost sixty children, located where the road stops in the Chihuahuan Desert. It's situated across the Rio Grande from San Antonio del Bravo in Mexico, but there's no direct transport link between the two villages.

In the 1990's, the American government closed down the school in Candelaria, officially for financial reasons. On the Mexican side, there's no school or school bus, as the dirt road linking the village to the only town in the area, Ojinaga, is very bad. The only possibility for the children to receive an education in Mexico would be for them to move to a town in the region, but most of the families have land in San Antonio del Bravo and don't want to leave their village. So the children have to travel three and a half hours every day by bus to attend the school in Presidio (USA), another frontier town. Most of the menfolk live in San Antonio del Bravo. At weekends, the residents leave Candelaria to join their families on the Mexican side.

In the 1990's, the inhabitants clubbed together to construct a footbridge, creating a permanent link between the two villages. Passing from one country to the other was still illegal, but it was tolerated by the US government until 2008, when the bridge was destroyed by the authorities. Inhabitants wishing to cross the frontier legally then had a five-hour drive to reach a village two kilometres away as the crow flies.

The salt cedar, a kind of tamarisk (a species of tree from North Africa) was introduced by the American authorities in 1920 in order to reduce erosion in the Rio Grande valley, which posed problems for the US government. Given that the river delineates the boundary, the constantly-shifting river bed of the Rio Grande also meant that the frontier kept changing. The salt cedars were intended to stabilize the river bed and so establish a clearly-defined boundary. After their introduction, the authorities noticed that the trees were enormous water consumers and a highly invasive variety. This tree species secretes salt into the ground, hence its name. It was discovered that this characteristic inhibits all other sorts of trees or plants from growing in proximity to a salt cedar. The region gradually dried out and the salt cedar soon became the only variety of tree left in the valley.

In 2010, the American government tried to eradicate the salt cedars by introducing a species of beetle from Tunisia. The trees do appear to have died since the arrival of the insects, but the latter have also wiped out another sort of tamarisk, a tall, evergreen variety, not invasive or destructive like the salt cedar, which was planted to provide shade near houses and ranches. These trees were much appreciated in this desert region and their disappearance is problematic for the valley's inhabitants. The other negative consequence of the introduction of the beetles is the creation of a forest of dead trees that often catches fire in the spring (sometimes five times a month).

The cause of these fires is still a mystery. According to the region's American inhabitants, they are accidentally started by local farmers on the Mexican side, where there are no regulations. However, some Candelaria residents think that the fires might be deliberately lit by American border patrols to prevent Mexicans from hiding in this dead forest. It's rare that the firefighters come to extinguish these frequent fires as Candelaria is too isolated. And so the valley is known as "the forgotten valley".



Elisa Larvego
Salt Cedar's forest after a fire, Ruidosa, Texas, 2012, 60x70 cm

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TOWARDS A BORDER ECOSOPHY

CONVERSATION BETWEEN PASCAL BEAUSSE AND ELISA LARVEGO



Pascal Beausse : **Your work on the Mexico – United States border was based on a specific place, related to a community. How did you develop your close relationship with this particular area in order to represent the living conditions that it generates?**

Elisa Larvego: Invited in 2011 to be artist in residence at *Fieldwork : Marfa* (Texas) for three months, I soon became interested in the village of Candelaria. The recent destruction of the bridge there, mentioned by one of the inhabitants, aroused my curiosity. I went to Candelaria and was surprised to find just a small hamlet, a kind of ghost village. There was no café, no shop and I sensed it would be difficult to meet the people living there. As I was leaving, I happened to pass the school bus coming back from Presidio (USA) and I realised that the children made this long journey every day. Later, I learnt from press cuttings that the school in Candelaria had been closed down without justification in 1998 by the US government. I also came to understand that the families were divided between the village of San Antonio del Bravo (Mexico) and Candelaria, so that the children could receive an education. I was very interested in this separation of a family unit by a boundary, for it gave me the chance to observe closely how territory can determine identity. It also leads to territorialisation by gender: the men stay in Mexico to farm their land and tend to the animals, while the women spend the week in the United States to enable the children to go to school. This relationship between the inhabitants and their context (geographical, political and environmental) has interested me for many years and I've already studied this connection in several of my projects.

This frontier between the “first” and the “third” world is a very real and highly militarised border, crystallizing the absurd inequality between human beings. Over and above the political geography, you represent the spatial practices that develop there, in the form of tactics and games, in everyday life.

The Mexico – United States border has featured in many photographic or film documentaries. Yet the Candelaria region doesn't tally with the generally accepted idea of this highly-guarded frontier with its walls stretching for kilometres. It's not a migration transit point but a kind of vacuum, an area abandoned by the authorities. Crossing the frontier doesn't lead to the other, the unknown or the stranger, but to a familiar place, another home. It was the uniqueness of this context that made me want to start work on this region.

After my first encounter with Candelaria, I felt that this project should focus on a child's viewpoint. I didn't want to carry out interviews, but rather let the images speak for themselves by following the child around in her daily life, between her journeys to and from school, her life in Candelaria and her return trips to San Antonio. I thus met Pilar Avila who lived in Candelaria until the school was closed down. She subsequently went to live in Marfa so that her children didn't have to make the journey by bus every day. She has a house in Candelaria where she suggested I could stay. While there, she invited me to meet her family. This is how I met Clarisa. I was quickly captivated by her open temperament and decided to focus my project on her. This seven year old girl rapidly introduced me into her circle of friends and neighbours. This is how I was able to follow her around as she played, either in the riverbed or in the village of Candelaria. I soon found the children's games fascinating, as they added a new dimension to the place. By transforming the border into a playground and by introducing a touch of lightness through their constant laughter, the children also highlighted, through playing tag or fearing the arrival of the police, the dangers inherent in this river channel, where any presence is forbidden. These moments brought two different worlds together and made them interact, the almost dreamlike one of play and the very real world of border illegality.

Clarisa's family, composed solely of women on the American side of the boundary, generously introduced

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me to the life of this village and the private world of their family unit. Meeting this family gave me a gradual understanding of these inhabitants' unique situation, living divided between two countries. I was able to forge ties of confidence with them, in fact, by spending time living there and by building up a relationship with each of the women. Clarisa lives with her great aunt, Antonia, and she shares a bedroom with her mother, Adriana, her aunt, Lupita and sometimes her grandmother, Clara. My attachment to these three generations of women grew out of the evenings I shared with them. It was also primarily this attachment that led me to carry out this project, inspiring me to relate their singular living conditions in both still and moving images.

How did you divide up the work between the two complementary media of video and photography?

I mainly worked with the moving image when dealing with people, whereas my interest in the location was expressed through photography. The only photographs I took of the families were at their request. This separation between the media came about naturally. I wanted to follow Clarisa in movement and not freeze her in a certain time and place. Video gradually allowed me to enter the life of this young girl, while at the same time evoking her environment.

The photographic work developed little by little, through hearing the story of the introduction of the tamarisk trees. After having witnessed some of the fires, I asked around about their possible origin. The replies, like the history of these trees, seemed to crystallise the conflict situation in this region. This also established another type of connection between an environment and its inhabitants: not just people being determined by their context, but also a transformation of place as a result of human beings and their conflicts.

The photographs enabled me to record the state of the lands ravaged by fire after the event. It also allowed me to document the traces of the conflict in this environment, such as the remains of the footbridge or the cables suspended above the Rio Grande. However, I also filmed these spaces to show the violence of the fires and their ongoing progression, as well as to situate Clarisa in the context of this vast desert landscape.

Salt Cedar is my second project carried out using both video and photography. During this process, I

enjoy creating links with the people I portray in order to be able to film them in their private lives. Video, for me, is a medium of connections and movement; it makes me adapt to the rhythm of another. Photography counterbalances my practice of the moving image. I appreciate the slowness and solitude of my photographic work. It allows me to distance myself occasionally from the subject I'm tackling and to emerge from the state of immersion that video is for me.

When my work is exhibited, I like the way these two media inspire different experiences for visitors, due to the immediacy and stable presence of the photographs and the duration and moving presence of video.

Your working methods and ethics lead you to spend a significant amount of time, on several occasions, sharing the lives of the people that you represent. In your view, is this an essential requirement for the production, through these documentary forms, of a renewed understanding of today's world?

I don't think it's the only way to produce a new form of awareness but it's true that it's the method that suits me and which seems the most appropriate for what I wish to achieve. As I believe in the power of providing only the point of view of certain inhabitants to shed light on a history and a context, rather than seeking to show a global viewpoint, it's vital for me to create a true personal relationship with these people. This ongoing work gives me a more individual understanding of the places concerned and a progressive appreciation of the inhabitants as well as of their personalities. In such a context, even though some people are very welcoming, it takes time for them to reveal the complexities of their lives.

What's more, I visited Candelaria at two times of the year. This enabled me to see the village in two different lights. There are only two seasons in this region, winter and spring. Everything changes from one to the other: the vegetation, the light and the pace of life of the inhabitants. In winter, the landscape appears almost black and white and short evenings. Spring brings its colours and a brightness which lasts until late into the night. I first discovered Candelaria in the winter, then returned there in the spring, which meant I could observe how Clarisa's life changes with the seasons. In winter, she goes back home early, around six o'clock, when the

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sun goes down, and rejoins Adriana, Lupita, Clara and Antonia around the stove. In spring, she stays out until half past nine, playing with other village children near the only streetlight. In winter, the atmosphere in the house is more taciturn; in spring, sounds and words fill the spaces and the women in Clarisa's family confide freely. If I hadn't visited on two occasions, I would never have discovered these two aspects of the same place and of a single life, which has allowed me to reinforce the connection between Clarisa's environment and her daily life.

What have you learnt from this experience?

Firstly, I've discovered that it's possible to live divided between two countries such as the United States and Mexico by illegally crossing the border every week. I was astounded by this, as I'd never imagined that such a non-zone could exist on this now mythical frontier. I was also struck by the fact that this separation of the families is due to the parents' desire to give their children an education. Indeed, these mothers sacrifice a significant amount of their conjugal and social life during the time their children are at school, in the hope of giving them a better future.

This work strengthened my conviction of the importance of the link between a place and its inhabitants. It was the first time I'd been able to observe such a relationship to a territory in the people living there and the way in which this relationship shapes their lives according to the geographical reality of these fragmented areas. It was also the first time I'd observed the repercussions of a political and social situation on an environment.

This project led me to add texts, according equal importance to them and to the images. This is a new element in my work and it proved essential for an understanding of the context during the *Salt Cedar* exhibition. Indeed, as a result of my decision not to include video interviews, my visual work lacked historical, political and social references. The texts seem to me to provide elements of a response to the work, without offering too many keys to the interpretation of the images, thus leaving the spectator free to make their own appreciation while still having an awareness of the context.

This experience, though difficult at times, showed me the true generosity of these women and children, who

allowed me to enter their lives by accepting both my presence and that of the camera. I realised that these relationships were not only personally enriching for me, but also for the people I met, who enquired about my own world. This is how I came to be adopted by this family, since they too were curious to know where I came from and how I lived. For these people, living divided between two countries and trapped between two checkpoints, I introduced a different reality into their home.



Photo Elisa Larvego, *Leaving the US, Candelaria, Texas, 2012, 60 x 74 cm*