Session IV: Photography at the Borders: Imaging/Imagining Texas and Mexico
Sunday, April 3, 2005, 1:30-3:00 PM

Co-Moderators: Barbara Rockenbach, ARTstor, and Jane Devine Mejia, Vancouver, B.C.

Speakers:
Prof. Geoff Winningham, Department of Visual Arts, Rice University
Prof. Robert Curley, Departamento de Estudios Socio Urbanos, Universidad de Guadalajara, Mexico
Prof. Delilah Montoya, Art Department, University of Houston

Recorders: Jane Devine Mejia and Miguel Juarez

Sponsor: Photography Librarians Discussion Group

Summary:

Jane Devine Mejia introduced the panel by explaining that the idea had emerged from the Photography Librarians Discussion Group meeting in New York last year. The group had agreed that Houston would be the ideal venue for an exploration of Texan and Mexican photography. Barbara Rockenbach then introduced Prof. Geoff Winningham from Rice University with an outline of his extensive career, citing his well-known photographic studies of Texan culture and his longstanding interest in the border as a visual theme.

Winningham's presentation took the form of a travelogue of images taken along the U.S./Mexico border. He started in El Paso and drove eastward to Marfa and then to Presidio before venturing to Ojinaga, Mexico. Along the way, Winningham was intrigued by local curiosities, roadside diners, and popular iconography on signs. Many of these displayed the blend of Mexican and Texan cultures that gives the borderland its unique character. Winningham traveled north to Big Bend National Park, then to Marathon and Del Rio, Texas. In Laredo - Nuevo Laredo, he photographed the international border crossing, which is the most heavily used pedestrian and motorist entry point connecting Texas and Mexico. One of the most extraordinary sights he photographed was the hand-pulled ferry linking Texas and Mexico by a cable across the river. His journey ended on the Gulf of Mexico in the Boca Chica State Park, where Mexicans and Americans frequent the beaches on either side of the border, just a few yards from each other.

Prof. Curley is Manuel Alvarez Bravo's great nephew and has a personal collection of his photographs, many of which have never been published. The original images are 5 x 7-inch vintage prints. For his presentation, Curley selected eighteen photographs taken during several of Alvarez Bravo's trips within Mexico during the 1930s and 1940s. He chose these images thematically rather than following chronology or geography. The work ranged from spectacular landscapes and architectural themes to striking portraits of indigenous Mexicans, all of which Curley analyzed from an aesthetic and historical perspective, setting the work in the context of post-revolutionary Mexico. He invited the audience to comment on whether there would be interest in a small book of the photographs, which he felt might be a better way of circulating them than a formal museum exhibition.
Prof. Montoya presented her compelling multimedia exploration of the perilous migration trail across the harsh Sonora Desert from Northern Mexico into Arizona. The trail runs through the O'odham Indian Reservation, where the U.S. border patrol has no jurisdiction, and many Mexican migrants die of thirst and exhaustion each year. The whole experience of illegal migration has been cloaked in silence, since migrants cannot openly express what happened to them on their journey into the U.S. Montoya's work gives voice to this traumatic rite of passage through panoramic landscape photographs, found objects from the trail, video footage and graphic devices such as maps and posters that articulate the reasons behind the migrant ordeal: family, opportunity, work, money and education. The critical importance of water to migrants' survival is expressed in her images of the large water tanks provided by the volunteer organization Humane Borders along the trail. Working with her student Orlando Lara, Montoya created an installation using these materials at Talento Bilingue de Houston for Fotofest 2004. Members of the audience encouraged her to seek exhibition venues in other parts of the U.S. so that the wider community learns more about the migrant experience from a new perspective.