

## Interview with Miguel Fernández de Castro

On the occasion of the screening of *Grammar of Gates/Gramática de las puertas* (2019) for Artists' Film International 2020, Ballroom Marfa interviews Miguel Fernández de Castro. The artist generously discusses the context in which the film was made. This conversation took place over email with Ballroom curator Daisy Nam and translated by curatorial assistant Gabriela Carballo.



Miguel Fernández de Castro, *Grammar of Gates / Gramática de las puertas*. Digital video still. Courtesy the artist and Ballroom Marfa.

**Ballroom Marfa:** Your film complicates the histories and narratives of occupation and control of the Tohono O’odham land. What initially brought you to this area of the Sonora-Arizona borderlands? How did you gain access to the Tohono O’odham land, and what was your relationship with the community?

**Miguel Fernández de Castro:** My practice as a visual artist developed from a deep rootedness in the Sonoran desert borderlands in northern Mexico. My ancestry, as that of most people in the region, results from the intermarriage of small ranchers who arrived as settlers and the local indigenous population. I came to learn about this as a boy when a number of people in the region got into researching their O’odham ancestry with the purpose of acquiring a tribal ID, which they saw as a

means to gaining US citizenship. Even though the IDs were validated by O’odham authorities in Sonora, tribal authorities in Sells, Arizona considered them fraudulent and discarded them, at least initially.

As I began developing my work as an artist, I became involved in the social dynamics of this territory, especially because my studio is located along one of the region’s main rural smuggling trails, a few miles south of the U.S. border. These experiences had led me to think about the territory in a critical way, and to question the political and poetic implications of an arbitrary border.

**BM:** There’s a particular timeframe of the late 1950-70s that you engage with in your film: *Geronimo Jones* (1970); the revision of the *Practical Spanish Grammar*

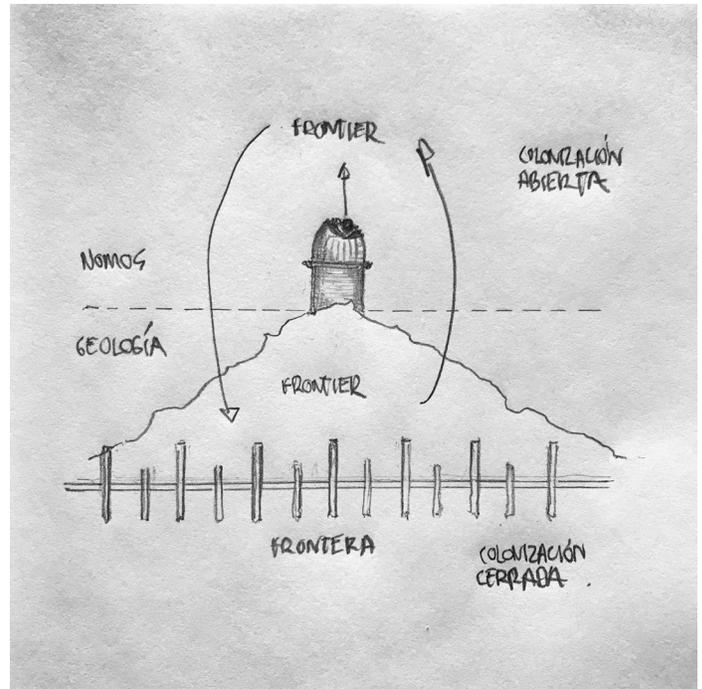
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for *Border Patrol Officers* (1968); the Observatory National Foundation construction on the land (1958), in addition to the present moment. Why this period specifically? Is there a moment in US history you're pointing to? Today's extreme border control is inextricably linked to 9/11 and the consequent expansion of Homeland Security—the rhetoric of “War on Terror” was then adapted to the “War on Drugs.” Was there something specific in the '60s, or general cold war politics? Or perhaps these dates are tied to advances in technology and media at that time?

## MFdC:

As Mexicans living in the borderlands, we began to feel the effects of Nixon's “War on Drugs” back in 1971 — as did the black and brown minorities in the U.S. inner cities. This was way before the “War on Terror” and the US current anti-immigration rhetoric. I have a profound —and perhaps nostalgic— interest in the local stories about life in the borderlands during the '60's and '70's. I like listening to people who lived in Sonora or Arizona back in those days. From what they said —and I think oral traditions are essential knowledge— there used to be entire outdoor markets with food and music at the O'odham traditional border gates way out in the desert. None of that is left today. The links between the Arizona O'odham and the Sonoran rural communities were closer in terms of kinship, trade and, of course, smuggling. The forces unleashed by the initial “War on Drugs” in the seventies, are key to understanding the current struggles and conflicts of these lands.

**BM:** In the work there is a politics of images, image-making, and technology (the 360-degree surveillance camera for policing, television showing “Cowboy and Indian” movies for entertainment, telescope and imaging of the sun). What do you think about the technologies that allow for your own filmmaking? What do you use in your films (for example, cameras, drones), and what is your decision-making process in using those apparatuses?



Miguel Fernández de Castro, drawing during conceptualization of *Grammar of Gates/Gramática de las puertas*.

## MFdC:

Yes, my practice as an image-maker sometimes deliberately mimics the State's ways of seeing. This is my way of foregrounding the extent to which our gaze has been militarized. That is, it has been trained by devices and expectations of military origin. By combining this type of imagery —such as the drone's omnipresent eye— with footage resulting from a closer and more rooted engagement with this land, I intend to undermine the undisputed power of the former and create a form of resistance counter-gaze.

During the conceptualization of the video, I kept drawing a telescope on a mountain (see image above) looking simultaneously towards outer space and the ground. It's at least ironic that such a powerful telescope, a device strategically designed to facilitate the colonization of new outer space frontiers, is precisely located on a land that was itself the object of a series of colonial occupations.

What I think is really interesting, and I try to convey in the video, is that nowadays, the military and expansion-

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ist gaze is not exclusive to the U.S Border Patrol, but in a way it's also shared by the powerful and heavily-armed Mexican mafia groups who control access to border in Sonora. Organizations on both sides of the border, either governmental or criminal, rely on similar vision technologies and through them exert brutal violence over the bodies that inhabit these lands. The surveillance devices used by Border Patrol not only push migrants into remote desert areas, but also encourage the adoption of growingly sophisticated weapons and strategies among mafias south of the border and produce an escalation of violence.

In fact, we hear of cases of actual collaboration between Mexican mafias and Border Patrol agents. It's said that some agents would take \$25,000 in exchange for collecting and transporting smuggled cargo from the reservation to Tucson. Beyond the legal implications of these case, what interests me is that these practices reveal the existence of links far more complex than we are willing to admit.

**BM:** In addition to film, you also work in installation and photography. How do you begin your research process? At what point do you decide the material and form of the work?

**MFdC:**

A central part of my research process is engaging with official documents and archives. This has allowed me to examine how the language deployed by those in power enables certain forms of actions and forecloses others. For instance, last year I had the opportunity to sit at the Joaquín "El Chapo" Guzmán Loera trial in Brooklyn, NY. Beyond the mediatic fascination with his persona, which doesn't interest me, it was compelling to see how legal jargon was deployed during the long sessions and cross-examinations of witnesses in the courthouse environment. This legal performance had consequences thousands of kilometers down south, in the same territories that *Grammar of Gates* portrays.

The public spectacle mounted by the prosecution to convict a fallen drug lord could at times seem tedious or even absurd. However, I was aware of the fact that the legal terminology deployed in the courtroom was the same that had created the conditions that turned Mexico into a mass grave. In that process, the border became not only a virtual warfront, but also an asset to be exploited for huge profit by groups on both sides.

As I was inspecting documents from past decades, which were related to the aforementioned events at the trial, I came across the books edited by the US Department of Justice, among which was the *Practical Grammar for Border Patrol Officers*. This book is another example of how protocol language sets the stage for brutality. The supposedly neutral grammar exercises already contain the violent blueprint for how interactions with aliens should unfold.

Even though my work, as any work, is a form of elaboration, I think it often consists of only minimal gestures grounded in a territory. After extensive research, a key part of my process is finding that essential element that condenses complex issues. This could turn out to be a gate, a book, a brick, a gram of gold—which are almost like metonymic material signs of the intangible phenomena unfolding in these agitated lands.