



Kerry Doyle

DUET

What is visual and palpable here is marginalized and veiled for most of us in the UK... it takes visiting somewhere unfamiliar to more easily recognize what is out of place - Freya Gabie

The 1,954-mile-long border between the United States and Mexico is a landscape full of paradox. Marked by an increasingly militarized environment of walls, fences, technology, and law enforcement, this strip of land represents an undeniable (if persistently surmountable) material divide between the two countries. Barriers established to regulate the movement of people and goods form much of our mediated understanding of this place, tangible boundaries that separate one nation from the other. Yet, amidst the visible separations, the border is also a site of profound connection. The United States-Mexico border is a microcosm of the complexities inherent in our globalized world. It's a convergence point where economies, culture, language, and human experience collide, blurring the lines of demarcation.

Border communities stand testament to human efforts to both define and transcend boundaries, reflecting an intricate tapestry of shared humanity within the landscape of division. On the surface of this tapestry, objects and ideas like nation and culture have legible boundaries that reinforce the binaries of the United States and Mexico – of us and them, security and violence, rich and poor, here and there. But like every tapestry, it has a backside, a complex field of threads that are accessible but often unseen, the maze of knots and twists that form traces of the labor and artistry just beneath the surface, the intricate and chaotic underbelly of this place. This is where I found Freya Gabie.

Much of the work in this exhibition was created during Freya's three months at the Border Arts Residency in El Paso, Texas in 2022. During that time, I would often see her walking the streets of El Paso, the very sight of her a surprise in a city that is most often experienced by car. This walking was my introduction to her place-based, labor-intensive way of understanding the world around us and a testament to her artistic commitment to a local specificity that is somehow essential to understanding our globalized world.

The works in this exhibition reflect an interest in the inherent contradictions of places and highlight the interplays between balance and imbalance, between strength and vulnerability, resilience and endurance, and the fragility of the everyday. The two-channel video installation *Duet* features imagery from two different sides of the border seven miles apart from one another – the Municipal Rose Garden in El Paso, Texas, and El Señor Community Garden in Ciudad Juarez. The imbalance in infrastructure between the two cities, particularly in regard to water access, is visible in the frames. The water flows freely through irrigation systems in El Paso, producing blooming roses despite the desert landscape, in the same landscape across the border the community garden survives with small amounts of water from a well. The monitors have been installed on opposite sides of the gallery, forcing viewers to choose between watching either Mexico or the United States, a tactic that might at first seem to reinforce a border binary. But at the same time, an overlapping soundtrack mixes the audio from both sides in a duet that hints at a more complex relationship, an invitation from the artist to explore this undefined territory.

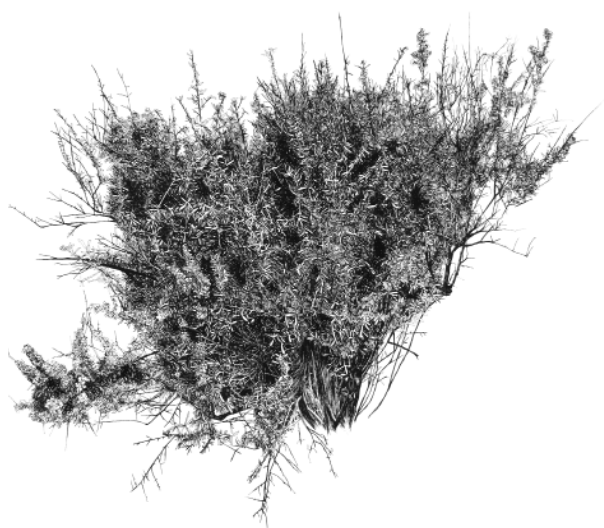
Cut is a deck of cards showing 52 original nameplates from the municipal rose garden that reflect an affinity for the order and subjugation of nature. *Contested Spaces* documents indigenous plants that grow freely in the border soil, here the images are complex, ambiguous, and difficult to define. Contrasting the two works, we are invited to consider the difference between labeling a thing and knowing a thing, a difference that is central to the tensions that the artist presents throughout the exhibition. It is also present in works like *An Invitation* which uses the simple form of a piñata to document how labor, goods, and services move back and forth across the border in ways that make it difficult to determine where an object is produced – the Made In America labels found on consumer goods oversimplifying an intricate transnational dance.

Through the recreation of what appear to be everyday objects made with unusual levels of labor, attention and care, the artist also invites us to take a closer look at our domestic spaces. *Between the Lines*, while not made at the border, reflects both the methodology and concerns of the artist's residency there. Taking simple plastic laundry baskets, Freya uses a slow, deliberate, labor-intensive process to

grind back the forms of the objects to the most extreme extent possible, so that what is left is the barest skeleton of the structures, fragile and vulnerable. In their precarious weightlessness, they threaten to collapse onto themselves. In *Lifebuoy* she gradually transforms cheap bars of soap through the laborious and intimate act of washing her hands over and over again. The imprint of her hands returns humanity to the manufactured objects, conjuring up both the hands of the people who make the soap and those who use it daily in unremarkable ways.

The work here is temporary and transient, packed and moved easily, reminiscent of the everyday objects that might be found in even the humblest of dwellings. The domestic setting of the gallery reinforces these implied intimacies, one feels the artist has truly brought this work home in a meaningful way. *Duet* as an exhibition transcends borders, both physically and conceptually. It is an invitation to viewers to reflect on their place in the world, urging them to contemplate both the complexities of global interconnectedness and the specificities of place. The labored, slow, process-driven making that Freya has at the center of her work allows those particular places to be seen in new ways, through a willingness to slow down and connect to both new and familiar landscapes, stepping back to see the defining outlines and crouching in close to see the almost imperceptible gestures of the everyday.

Kerry Doyle is the Director of the Ruben Center for the Visual Arts at The University of Texas at El Paso.



Difficult Maps 2022 Pen on paper

Chloe Hodge

Inside the Space of a Line

How do we adapt or reconfigure ourselves when our conditions are in flux?

What forms of resistance and ingenuity do we develop when faced with a border?

How do people meet across an unequal divide?

And, what affect does precarity have on the body?

In *Duet*, the viewer is a participant: required to activate, move and transform, and to treat this environment with utmost care. Populated with works made during Gabie's time at the Border Art Residency in El Paso, exploring the Rio Grande river and its role as a shifting border between the USA and Mexico, this intimate space has come to reflect the precarity of this place. Here, we are new arrivals, and we must learn to exist in a highly sensitive ecosystem, to be fluid yet vigilant, to pay attention and to respect a balance held by tenuous arrangements.

Duet draws us inside with a game of chance: *Cut* is a pack of playing cards printed with the name plaques of the 52 rose species growing in El Paso's Municipal Rose Garden. Designed for a far different climate, this perfectly manicured American garden is soaked with a stream of crystal clear water, glimmering in the desert sun. Breaking the pack reveals American rose names such as 'Master Lincoln,' 'American Pride,' or even the more conspicuous 'White Masterpiece.'

In the two-channel film *Duet*, the Municipal Rose Garden emerges from the depths of winter and reaches into full, vibrant bloom. Facing this rich image is a second garden, which appears quite different. Having discovered the Municipal Rose Garden, Gabie searched for a Mexican counterpart and found El Huerto Del Señor Community Garden, created by local volunteers to provide food. While roses in El Paso sit in thick, wet, imported soil, the community garden's dusty plants fight for a trickle from the hose. Water divides the communities of El Paso and Juárez in a multitude of ways.

Unlike buttery rose petals, local indigenous plants have formed strong skeletal-like structures to survive this extreme environment. *Contested Spaces* sees partial X-rays of cholla, octotillo, soap tree yucca, Mexican buckeye, Texan mountain laurel and

desert willow embedded in glass panels, which lean precariously unfixed. The plants' status might too be unfixed: they are indigenous to this land, yet caught on one side of its moving political border. With their formidable bodies strong enough to withstand X-ray, these plants can cross the border as copies – still, leaving themselves behind.

Fragmenting, reducing, splitting, scraping – breaking down and drawing back is key to Gabie's practice. *Between the Lines* is a Brâncusi-esque tower formed from fine plastic frameworks, stacked upon one another. Eroded by the artist, this fragile body was once a set of generic plastic laundry baskets – reminiscent of armatures, they appear simultaneously as a beginning and an end, another in-between. Made in China and sold in cities the world over, the baskets are one of many necessities bought cheaply in El Paso by Juárez residents travelling over with a border card, while shops in Juárez cater to tourism from the USA. This exemplifies the many delicate symbioses between El Paso and Juárez, written along their own lines, and which could easily be toppled.

Our presence becomes more threatening with *Proxy*. An impossible object, it is a glass rope comprising thousands of tiny beads, forced together to become strong. If we give into temptation and climb the rope, if the rules of this space are broken and one bead shatters, its entire constitution is brought to collapse. To survive here is to restrain or be restrained; *Thief* is a series of copper, terracotta and porcelain casts of women's elastic hair bands. If they are touched, they will disintegrate to dust, ashes even. Nearby, short film *Mandown* sees an inflatable man attempt to stand and fall repeatedly, a duet of resistance and surrender.

Upstairs, five metre work *Lifebuoy* emits a pungent artificial scent: ninety-six antibacterial Lifebuoy soaps have been individually washed by hand, eroding a gram at a time. Translucent fleshy gems, they sit on a breezeblock plinth, fatty deposits sinking into the grit. Banal objects, these are both precious commodities in Juárez where scarcity and

cardboard homes are common. Migrant workers move towards the maquiladora factories, providing cheap unregulated labour to major international companies, and receive pay so poor that they must buy one breezeblock at a time, slowly piling these up outside until they have enough to build a room, finally a house.

An Invitation was made in a Mexican factory, commissioned by the artist. Like many items made here, it was then sold in the USA, in this case just over the border in El Paso. It resembles a popular American hammer, one of thousands of items made in Mexican factories and marketed as 'Made in the USA.' *An Invitation* is the only work in *Duet* which is not physically present and instead documented, as it could not travel by hand inside a suitcase, as every other piece could. A party game made in the shape of a weapon or tool, it carries a sense of futility: it suggests violence or repair but cannot offer either. Again, there is this sense of paralysis, of an inability to affect change. What remains is the offer to break the piñata and see what treasures can come from demolishing an existing structure.

Dptych *Difficult Maps* marks a close to the exhibition, yet its small, sturdy chamiza plants were Gabie's initial guiding light as how to live on the border. The chamiza is the namesake for a hundred-year border conflict here, when the Rio Grande river changed course and people found themselves moved motionlessly between countries. This humble salt bush, which lives by continuously responding to its saline landscape, encapsulates what it takes to exist here in its adaptability to constantly shifting conditions, hardy resilience and its evergreen optimism.

Chloe Hodge is a London-based curator with ten years' experience working with international artists and institutions.

Cover: Freya Gabie *Dissonant Landscapes* 2022
partly erased black and white photographs

FREYA GABIE
Duet
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