

Zoe Leonard

*Excerpts from Al río / To the River*

For the first time in Italy, Galleria Raffaella Cortese presents a curated selection of passages from Zoe Leonard's *Al río / To the River*. This emblematic work consists of hundreds of photographs taken between 2016 and 2022, along the Rio Grande/Río Bravo, where for 2,000 km the river is used to demarcate the border between the United States and Mexico. Leonard says: "The shifting nature of a river – which floods periodically, changes course and carves new channels – is at odds with the political task it is asked to perform".

These powerful and nuanced photographs describe the natural beauty of the region, while also drawing attention to political and human dimensions of life in the borderlands. Through Zoe Leonard's gaze, the river is seen as a complex place where daily life unfolds alongside control, conflict and surveillance. In this journey along the river, the artist depicts nature and built environments; movements of animals and people; and structures that both connect and divide. Together these elements become chapters in an evocative, ongoing narrative.

*Al río / To the River* is structured through "passages", sequences of photographs that unfold in chronology, continuity and movement. Leonard creates visually rich compositions filled with meaning, where one can find references to pre- and post-colonial histories, and where close attention is paid to systems of power evident not only in the form of walls and fences, checkpoints and detention centers but also in the constant flow of people and commercial goods across the river in both directions. This extensive work reflects on the civic and symbolic significance of boundaries, which resonates especially at this time of unprecedented global human migration.

As the artist says: "This work considers not only a geographic location but also a social and political landscape".

For the exhibition *Excerpts from Al río / To the River*, Zoe Leonard has selected a number of passages – including previously unreleased ones – from her extensive photographic work, interspersing harsh images of border control infrastructure and desolate urban landscape along with images of peaceful rural communities, animals at pasture and water at the heart of it all as a source of life.

Furthermore, Zoe Leonard's photographic work advances a metatextual exploration as a medium and a material. Bringing into question the ways in which photography has been used to frame the world, both literally and metaphorically, Leonard looks at how photographs convey and construct social and political viewpoints through their visual and formal perspectives. Through her longstanding engagement with photographic medium and printing techniques, the artist asks us to reflect on the subjectivity of the photographer and, by extension, the complex nature of depiction itself.

The internationally recognized greatness of the artist is conveyed not only by the poetic quality of the images she creates but also by her critical and self-critical spirit towards the very act of making art and producing images. Zoe Leonard asks us to reflect on how an image-based account of the Rio Grande/Río Bravo can shape our perception of the border and borders and, more broadly, how we see and form our view of the world.

*Al río / To the River* was exhibited at MUDAM in Luxembourg (February 26 - June 6 2022), the Musée d'Art Moderne in Paris (October 15 2022 - January 29 2023) and the Museum of Contemporary Art Australia (August 11 - November 5 2023).