The Capital City Arts Initiative [CCAI] is pleased to present, #SueñoAmericano*, an exhibition by Lauren Cardenas, at Western Nevada College's Bristlecone Gallery from July 21 - September 30, 2021. CCAI extends its sincere appreciations to the artist, Western Nevada College, and to all those involved with the exhibition. In addition, CCAI thanks our commissioned writer, Josie Glassberg, who provided the following essay.*

#SueñoAmericano

The two American Dreams that most of us grow up with — dual narratives about working hard or getting lucky — both end with a belief that one of these scenarios will play out in our own lives. We will be born, or we will be made, or both. Either way, the end result is wild success (happiness, wealth, freedom, etc).

It doesn't quite matter that these dreams are polarities. As Americans, we love a good contradiction and have no trouble holding two or more opposing beliefs at once. Even if you're not from the United States, you know this just as well. Packaged with the pretext of trade and — more recently — democracy, the American Dream exports extremely well.

Too well. As it turns out, when we promise a better life, it doesn't matter if it's a real promise or not; people will suffer to find it. Travel thousands of miles. Leave their families. Die at the border trying to get in.

Since 9/11, we've been course correcting — attempting to explain that the American ideals we've been incepting into other countries stop short of the opportunity to pursue them here. We actually don't want your tired or your poor. Our last three presidents have made this clear with policies that have massively expanded the Department of Homeland Security, deported and detained millions of immigrants, and separated thousands of children from their parents. We have 608 miles of border fence and a rhetorical fixation with a big, beautiful wall.



608, 3 colored letterpress print on Kitikata paper, 11"x14" - 11" x 60', 2021

For those with eyes trained on the border, this is hard to watch. From a place of limited agency, watching becomes an act of witnessing; solidarity that still feels helpless. But the latest exhibition from Lauren Cardenas — whose childhood along the Texas-Mexico border has given her more of a grasp than a grip on her own "bifurcated Mexican-American identity" — encourages us to stare.

Titled *Sueño Americano*, the new body of work is characteristic of the former Tamarind Institute graduate and current University of Mississippi printmaking professor's low-tech, high-concept aesthetic — resulting in

objects and prints whose mundane appearances belie the complex skill required to make them. The two works in the exhibition — a representation of a wall and a representation of a flight — are innocuous and repetitive enough to induce a "state of stare" that transforms your immediate view and into a periphery of unease and suggestion.

Piling on themes of porous boundaries, Cardenas expands on previous works like *Green Curtain* (photolithographs that look at Kudzu vine as a border-atrocity shield); *Como Te Sientes? Mas Mejor* (milagro objects that explore magical thinking); and *Borderline* (a mixed-media installation that focuses on the aloneness of women's bedroom spaces). In *Sueño Americano*, the artist turns her dreamy gaze to the physical and psychological dimensions of the Mexican-American boundary, turning the walls of the Bristlecone Gallery into a meditation on two different border experiences.

The first is the border wall itself. Walking into the gallery, the viewer is met with what looks like a long, horizontal strip of vertical bars made up of side-by-side 11"x14" prints that span the back wall of the gallery. The piece, aptly titled *608*, does not try to mimic the size and scale of the actual fence (the vertical stripes only cover the midsection of the wall), but it does a passable enough impression to drop the hint. The fact that it is a paper partition — laboriously printed in umber and ochre letterpress ink instead of dramatically forged in rust-colored steel — gives the viewer a sense of remove.

Unlike the nearly one million illegal immigrants who have attempted the dangerous act of crossing the southern border in the past eight months, the gallery visitor is afforded the bodily safety and headspace of thinking about border control as an abstract terror...or not thinking about it. Feeling the whisper of restriction that the bars imply...or not feeling it. Giving into the vacant trance of vertical stripes instead, then snapping back into that familiar place of learned helplessness or righteous offended-ness that we inhabit so well. In this way, Cardenas' imposed disconnection helps us to identify our own, perhaps better than if we were standing in front of the real thing.



Cheese #6 In-flight Meal; laser print transfer on Kraft American Singles Cheese, incased in plexiglass; 12" x 9"; 2019 – 2020

Opposite the border wall are several groupings of what appear to be airplane windows. Moving closer, the illusion of windows give way to actual materials. Black rubber tubing circles a familiar image: an in-flight view of an airplane wing against some sky. This picture is printed on a slice of orange cheese. It may take a few moments to get over the novelty, but once the staring stops, loose connections begin to take shape.

The cheese is American cheese. The picture is a Polaroid - or at least it looks like a Polaroid (it is a digital photo printed on tattoo paper). But why?

From Cardenas' artist statement:
"[Illegal immigrants are] put on ICE Airplanes and given an American cheese sandwich, one of the most processed, commercialized, and symbolically 'American' things in this country."

From the Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) website:
"While on a flight, detainees are offered sandwiches, granola bars and water among other items or a full meal depending on the length of the flight. Additional food is provided for detainees with a documented medical need."

Despite this strange level of detail on their website, ICE is not required to disclose how many people they deport or flights they charter due to Title 42, which allows Border Patrol to expel — without due process — any person who "potentially poses a health risk" to the United States. [1]

Seen in this light, the rubbery photographs induce a nausea that is made worse by the too-precious sheen of Polaroid nostalgia. They are snapshots, but they are more than that. Though Cardenas' staged photos stand in for authentic moments, the window pieces are — in many ways — more real than a genuine photo from a genuine ICE flight because their form betrays the ugly nature of deportation itself.



And American cheese, besides being a metaphor for our country's most embarrassing instincts, functions as a literal preservative, a temporary canvas for an imitation of a nice view. A simulacra of an airplane window but also of the American Dream itself — its fakery, its disconnection from any real possibility or substance.

Four years ago, another Kraft single slice questioned the "luck" part of the American Dream when Trevor DeHaas tweeted out a photo of his sad-looking cheese sandwich from Fyre Fest, the massive music festival grift that parted thousands of aspiring influencers, rich kids, and regular kids from millions of their dollars. The tweet went viral, memefying a belief we already held but didn't yet have a perfect picture for...the idea that the other side of "luck" is "scam." Sometimes you're on one end of it, sometimes you're on the other.

1 It is only through the documentation of outside organizations that we have some idea about how ICE Air operates. According to one of these organizations, Witness At The Border, there were 1,713 deportation flights and 2,975 domestic flights (to US detention centers) in the last 12 months based on tracking apps that follow ICE-chartered airlines along the border.

In April, DeHaas announced that he would be auctioning off his original tweet as an NFT - hoping to jump on the art market bubble that has suddenly made famous jpegs and tweets worth millions of dollars overnight. But instead of getting rich quick, DeHaas is hoping to pay for medical expenses for his advancing renal disease, including a kidney donation.

This is where we are. Instead of wealth, citizens dream of basic medical care that the government can't (won't) provide. Instead of happiness, immigrants dream of safety that a slice of government cheese doesn't even begin to address.

Josie Glassberg
Reno, Nevada
July, 2021



Lauren Cardenas

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