ADA TRILLO

TIENDA ALEJANDRA

LA CARAVANA DEL DIABLO
Featuring photography and text by Ada Trillo
Contributors: Alyssa Provencio and Veronica Cianfrano
Edited by Veronica Cianfrano
Photographs © 2020, Ada Trillo
Published Jan. 2021
University of Central Oklahoma
100 N. University Dr.
Edmond, OK.
73034
1st ed.

This Catalogue is published in conjunction with the exhibition entitled,
“ADA TRILLO: LA CARAVANA DEL DIABLO”
Exhibition on view: 1/14/21-3/4/21
Melton Gallery
University of Central Oklahoma
Curated by Veronica Cianfrano

Front Cover: Ada Trillo, “On My Way To America”
Digital photograph courtesy the artist

Visit MeltonGallery.com or email MeltonGallery@uco.edu for additional information
CONTENTS

1-2  Foreword by Alyssa L. Provencio, Ph.D., Assistant Professor of Political Science, University of Central Oklahoma

2-3  Preface by Veronica Cianfano, MFA., Curator of Galleries and Collections, University of Central Oklahoma

4  Introduction by Ada Trillo, Artist and Documentary Photographer

5-18  *La Caravana* photographic series
photographs from this series were taken in 2018 • images and text courtesy Ada Trillo

19-26  *La Caravana Del Diablo* photographic series
photographs from this series were taken in 2020 • images and text courtesy Ada Trillo
The often proudly-made claim that the United States is a nation founded by immigrants glosses over the white supremacy and racism interwoven in our history and embedded in our policies. When the Constitution was first written, our nation’s founders never defined the term “citizen” and said almost nothing about immigration. The first codified law addressing immigration, the Naturalization Act of 1790, specified that naturalization was available to any “free, white person,” thus prohibiting indentured servants, slaves, and most women from becoming citizens. The blatant exclusion of Black and other non-White residents, as well as the omission of Native Americans, laid the groundwork for the discriminatory policies to come.

In the late 1800s, prohibitive practices continued with the Chinese Exclusion Act, which barred Chinese laborers’ immigration, fearing they were taking jobs from citizens. The rise of Catholic and Jewish immigration from Eastern Europe and the Great Depression prompted additional anti-immigrant sentiments in the early 1900s. In response, Congress passed the National Origins Act of 1924, which established a quota system to limit the number of people allowed to enter the country. The time’s economic troubles also led to the beginning of anti-Mexican and Latino attitudes with public campaigns such as “Real Jobs for Real Americans,” directed by President Herbert Mexican Hoover. In the 1930s, as part of the New Deal, the federal government and state and local governments across the nation forcibly deported between 400,000 and 2 million Mexican immigrants and United States citizens of Mexican descent. A similar mass deportation measure was inflicted on Filipino communities in 1935.

In Central and South America, Central Intelligence Agency-backed coups and corporate plundering of natural resources in the late 1800s have led to the poverty and violence that drives migrants to our borders today. Arranging from a coup d’état ousting a democratically-elected President in favor of a 40-year military dictatorship in Guatemala to supporting Pinochet’s regime of censorship, torture, and murder in Chile, the United States can be directly implicated in the corruption and instability that still exists in many Latin American countries.

Over the past four years, Donald Trump used his Presidency to continue the campaign against Black, Indigenous, and people of color like many before him. Our 45th President used words like criminal, alien, predator, and invasion on Twitter and in official White House statements to disparage those who dared to seek a better life for themselves in the United States. This rhetoric also spurred support of his infamous border wall (which also happened to be quite profitable for some Trump-devoted government contractors) and National Guard deployments, furthering his alarm-raising agenda.

On August 3, 2019, a white nationalist opened fire in an El Paso Walmart, citing “the Hispanic invasion of Texas” as his motive. There is a clear link between Trump’s words and his supporters’ actions. The Federal Bureau of Investigation’s data shows a rise in hate crimes over the past four years in areas where he won the 2016 election by larger margins.

As support of Trump’s racist positions grew, he began turning them into policy. Two of the most controversial and inhumane policies implemented by the Trump administration are known colloquially as the “zero tolerance” policy and the “remain in Mexico” policy. The first mandated the arrest of anyone crossing the border, particularly the southern border, unlawfully. This directive ultimately led to the separation of over 2,500 children from their families.

Despite knowing their own resilience and ability to reunify families, the craftiness that victims of the policy faced, the Trump administration continued expanding the zero-tolerance practices. It was not until after judicial interference and political pressure mounted, including intervention by over fifty CEOs of prominent American companies, that it was rolled back during June 2018. Notwithstanding, separations continued well into 2019, and the Administration’s incompetence has prevented many families’ reunification as of this writing.

I grew up in a family that looks like a diversity campaign cast—my primos, especially. We are Afro-Latina and Jewish, dark-skinned and light-skinned. Some are bilingual; some of us are not, despite our best attempts. We can trace our ancestral roots to Indigenous lands once held by the Spanish but now known as Texas and Northern Mexico. Our familial homeland straddles an imaginary border imposed on the people who lived there by the wars and treaties of the 1840s and 50s. This imaginary border determines whether a person is born a citizen of this country or not. This border, which used to be freely traveled after the Treaty of Hidalgo, has caused some in my family to contend with the worry of deportation—of a parent, of a friend, of a loved one. In the 1960s and 70s, my grandmother worked as a community advocate for undocumented workers who crossed that border, using her Spanish to help newcomers navigate our nation’s complicated immigration system. My story, and my family’s story, is an American story. Ultimately, it is an immigration story, which has spanned generations on both sides of a border—a border that can determine a person’s fate.

Ada Trillo’s exhibition allows us to see ourselves in the eyes of her subjects. She reminds those who have forgotten their own family’s immigration stories about what it means to choose an alternate path, no matter the difficulties. She challenges us to move beyond the other, the alien, and instead see people—people who want a chance to live freely, without fear.
Lange felt photographers had a duty to represent reality because visual media can too easily serve to seduce viewers into an idealized version of reality thus paralyzing us from social change.

Ada Trillo's photo-documentation of the caravans in Central America and Mexico present us with a similar opportunity to affect change. It is my view that Trillo's photographs are on par with those of Lange both in their formal qualities and in their historical importance/potential to ignite social change. Trillo and Lange both create intimate moments with their subjects in similar ways: the subject is closer to eye-level with the camera which means that the photographer is in the situation with the person being photographed, they aren't above them literally or figuratively; the person photographed is given importance over the situation or environment because they take up more space within the composition; finally, and perhaps most importantly, we see that the subject trusts the photographer. We can see through body language (eye contact, relaxed shoulders, a hand gesture, etc.) that in an act of ultimate generosity to us/the viewer, this person has allowed the photographer to capture them in a vulnerable, unposed state in an image that will live on longer than themselves. This trust between photographer and subject is essential in translating an intimate, earnest moment to the viewer. The viewer can look into the eyes of a mother. We know she is worried about her child by the lines on her face and her body language. We know this truth in our bones just by virtue of being human. Suddenly, we see only our shared humanity. Here is the power of the image.

Common mediated images of the migrant caravans are typically taken from afar and from above. The people in the photographs do not have discernable features; they do not appear to have individual agency, and they are visually swallowed by their surroundings. These formal choices focus on the situation rather than the effect of the situation on the individual, and helps perpetuate the shallow narrative of the caravans being a singular, faceless, mass of people. These types of images compile to form a one-sided view that aid in dehumanizing Latin American and Latinx people which primes us for dangerous apathy. Trillo's photographs do the important work of honoring the humanity of each person represented and creating space for us to shift focus from viewing asylum seekers as an anonymous mass to viewing them as human beings, in all their complex and beautiful totality, deserving of their basic human rights.

INTRODUCTION
By Ada Trillo, Artist and Documentary Photographer

I was born in El Paso, Texas but I was raised in Juárez, Mexico. As a teenager, I traveled back and forth between the two cities so I could attend school in the states. Witnessing life on the border as a young adult had a strong influence on my worldview and art practice. After years of working as a painter, I picked up a camera and started making pictures.

For the past four years I’ve been documenting the journeys immigrants take to reach the Mexico/U.S. border. I’ve photographed aboard the infamous La Bestia, a dangerous journey by freight train that migrants from Mexico and Central America ride every year to reach the border. Gangs follow the train with the sole purpose of kidnapping, robbing and raping the defenseless migrants on board. It’s estimated that eighty percent of passengers are subjected to violence while hundreds have died.

While the media often covers what is happening at the border, they too all to often overlook the individual trials, struggles, and humanity of those seeking to escape violence in pursuit of a better life. Spending countless days and nights living alongside those I photograph, I hope to present an honest, unadulterated view of migrant life. It’s critical to unveil individual journeys and explore the reasons why people were forced to leave their home.

In 2018, I flew to Chiapas to join La Caravana as it took its first steps into Mexican territory. The members of the caravan sought safety in numbers as they traveled over 1,800 miles to reach Tijuana. In order to cover such a distance, migrants traveled light, relying on donations and shelters for the food, water, clothing and medicine they desperately needed. In November 2018, approximately 7,000 migrants reached the end of their journey as they arrived in Tijuana. Most were housed at the Benito Juarez shelter, a converted outdoor sports arena which was later closed for unsanitary conditions. Migrants were met by angry locals who attacked them and aid groups such as the Red Cross.

From 2017 to 2019, I returned to my hometown of Ciudad Juárez to document the struggles of asylum seekers directly affected by Trump's Remain in Mexico policy. A glimpse into the besieged hopes, harsh uncertainties, and blunt realities – also the enduring dignity – of mainly Central American asylum-seekers forced into a cruel and dangerous waiting game by the 'Remain in Mexico' policy. I documented the daily life of those who sought refuge at Casa del Migrante, a Catholic-run migrant shelter in Juárez.

In January of 2020, I met up with a massive migrant caravan from Honduras fleeing violence and poor economic conditions. We traveled for 8 days from San Pedro Sula through Guatemala and into Mexico. People slept outside and went days without food. Finally the caravan crossed the Suchiate River into Mexico but was met by the recently established Guardia Nacional composed of former Federal, Military and Naval Police.

Mexican President, Andrés Manuel López Obrador has historically called for safe passage for migrants, but when U.S. President Donald Trump threatened to impose tariffs, Mexico reversed its policy and deployed soldiers to keep Central American migrants from entering Mexico.

Trump has effectively barred asylum seekers from entering the U.S. by threatening to impose tariffs and cut foreign aid to Central American countries. The human cost of Trump's political agenda is denying people their fundamental human rights. For many asylum seekers, deportation will result in living a life of extortion, impoverishment and even death. The full effect of Trump's xenophobic policies toward immigrants and asylum seekers will no doubt be felt for generations to come.

“Spending countless days and nights living alongside those I photograph, I hope to present an honest, unadulterated view of migrant life. It’s critical to unveil individual journeys and explore the reasons why people were forced to leave their home.”
My goal with these photographs is to document the plight and resilience of the refugees and migrants I met in Chiapas.

I want to expose the truth about who they are, the injustices they suffer, and all they have to offer both the United States and the world at large.
Seeking Asylum
Tijuana, Mexico
Archival inkjet print
41" X 28"
In October 2018, over 4,000 migrants from Honduras, Guatemala, and El Salvador gathered at Mexico’s southern border. Their hope was that strength in numbers would protect them against the dangers ahead.
Donald Trump jumped at the opportunity to promote his brand of anti-immigrant politics by declaring a "National Emergency."

*Reinforcing the Wall*
Tijuana, Mexico
Archival inkjet print
52" X 36.5"
He sent troops to the US border and threatened to cut humanitarian aid to Central America. As the situation between the Caravan and Mexican officials grew tense, I flew to Tapachula, Chiapas, near the Mexico-Guatemala border. The people I met were not the criminals depicted by Donald Trump. They were parents, students, and children with hopes and aspirations of living lives free of fear.
Many were fleeing extortion and death threats from gangs. Some clever young women had disguised themselves as men in order to avoid harassment along the way. Others were disabled and especially vulnerable to the dangerous journey north.
Many everyday people throughout Mexico showed compassion and solidarity with the Caravan by giving food, shelter and fresh clothes to those making the journey.
La Caravana Del Diablo, 2020

Crossing the Suchiate River
Guatemala-Mexico border
Archival inkjet print
41" X 28"
Almost There
Guatemala
Archival inkjet print
30" X 24"

Chelita clings to her mother amidst the chaos of migrants waiting to be admitted into Mexico. After days of waiting at the border, Julio César Sánchez, the Director General of Special Affairs for the Secretariat of Foreign Affairs of the Federal Government of Mexico, appeared as a representative of the Mexican Government and began allowing families to enter in small groups, after making ambiguous promises that didn’t apply to all members of the caravan. He never said what would happen to the families or where they would be taken.

Tear Gassed
Ciudad Hidalgo, Mexico
Archival inkjet print
30" X 24"

Upon arriving at the Mexican/Guatemalan border, roughly 800 migrants managed to cross onto Mexican soil and walk several miles to Frontera Hidalgo. It was here that hundreds of troops descended upon the caravan and forcibly herded many onto buses with the use of tear gas and riot shields. Women and children were caught in the chaos, many suffering chemical burns and other serious injuries.
Mexico closed its doors to migrants at the El Ceibo border on January 20, 2020. This frame captures an unaccompanied minor trying to cross illegally under the gate.

One member of the migrant caravan carries a United States flag to demonstrate his enthusiasm to become an American citizen. When conditions in your homeland are so dangerous that you are willing to pick up a new flag and start a new life in a country you don’t know, it produces a mixture of desperation and hope that won’t be dissuaded by tear gas and riot shields.
Upon their arrival at the Border, the migrants were met with barbed wire fences, blocking their passage. José, 6 years old, is waiting patiently at 3 a.m. to start his journey across the border via the Suchiate River.
Ada Trillo is a Philadelphia-based photographer, native to the Juarez-El Paso binational metroplex. In her work, she focuses on borders of inclusion and exclusion as they are experienced through people in forced prostitution; climate and violence-related international migration; and long-standing borders of race and class. Through the elements of documentary and fine art photography, Trillo lays bare our common humanity and dignity and brings attention to the impact borders have on exploited and marginalized people by amplifying their voices. Trillo’s work is in the permanent collection of the Philadelphia Museum of Art. She is the recipient of the Female In Focus 2020 best series award, and was recently featured in The Guardian, Vogue, and Mother Jones, among other publications. She has also been awarded The Me & Eve Grant with the Center of Photographic Arts in Santa Fe and received First Place in Editorial with the Tokyo International Foto Awards. Trillo has exhibited both nationally and internationally in NYC, Philadelphia, Luxembourg, England, Italy, and Germany. She holds degrees from the Istituto Marangoni in Milan and Drexel University in Philadelphia.

AdaTrillo.com

Images © Ada Trillo 2020