

Vivian Poey
Barquito de Papel: we are not butterflies
Photo/video installation

Artist Statement

My family has a long history of migration and I have always been interested in issues related to navigating borders. For years I have been photographing everyday physical borders that separate us from whatever is on the other side: walls, windows, screens as well as monumental borders like the ocean. In this experimental project I consider what it means to cross borders. These everyday borders serve as an intimate way to investigate the overwhelming issue of immigration, reminding us that the issue is a human issue rather than a merely political one. To drive this point I have included historical images of my family by the ocean, often separated by borders created by the background images. The view and experience that shape our perspectives differ on either side of any kind of border.

This installation combines shifting images of borders with *barquitos de papel*, paper boats, folded from paper printed with the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the Declaration of the Rights of the Child, adopted by the international community in 1989 and ratified by 196 countries (not including the United States). In this country, Immigration has always been a fraught issue. The Chinese Exclusion Act in 1882 and Operation Wetback in 1955 reflect this difficult reality. Over the past three decades immigration has become increasingly contentious leading to more restrictive immigration laws and enforcement, most recently culminating in the current “zero tolerance” policy enacted by the Trump administration in April of this year and leading to the separation of more than 2,500 children from their families at the border. But immigration is not only an American issue; it is a human issue that impacts people across the globe in ways that can be lifesaving or devastating.

My daughter’s grandparents are exiles from Cuba on one side and Haiti on the other. On both sides the ocean has proved to be a magnificent border that continues to be a challenge as it separates those who left the island and those who stayed behind. Some of my research has taken me to consider the beautiful and terrifying ways the ocean serves as conduit, barrier and vessel. Since 2014 there have been 21,000 recorded deaths during migration (a necessarily low estimate), the majority of these are caused by drowning, making the ocean a tomb as well.

The boats remind us of the vulnerability of migrant populations, particularly children and reference the *barquitos* in the children’s song:

*Barquito de papel, mi amigo fiel, / Little paper boat, my faithful friend,
llevame a navegar por el ancho mar. / carry me away over the wide sea.
Quiero conocer a niños de aquí y allá / I want to meet children from here and there
y a todos llevar mi flor de amistad. / and take them all my flower of friendship.
Abajo la guerra , arriba la paz / Down with war, up with peace.
Los niños queremos reir y cantar. / We children want to laugh and sing*

Some important notes:

In 2017 alone, there were 6163 recorded deaths during migration, this is a minimum estimate as many deaths go unreported and reliable data is difficult to get. The cause for the majority of these deaths is drowning.

International Organization of Migration (IOM)'s [Missing Migrants Project, 2017](#)

At least 300,000 unaccompanied and separated children moving across borders were registered in 80 countries in 2015-2016 - a near fivefold increase from 66,000 in 2010-2011. The total number of unaccompanied and separated children on the move worldwide is likely much higher.

The total number of refugees worldwide has increased by 59% over the last five years, from 10.4 million to 16.5 million. Half of these are children.

<https://publications.iom.int/books/fatal-journeys-volume-3-part-1-improving-data-missing-migrants>

April 6, 2018 Sessions notified Southwest Border States of the new “zero-tolerance policy” for illegal and attempted illegal entry into the United States.

<https://www.justice.gov/opa/pr/attorney-general-announces-zero-tolerance-policy-criminal-illegal-entry>

From May 6 to May 19, 658 children were separated from their parents due to the zero-tolerance policy

<https://www.politifact.com/truth-o-meter/article/2018/jun/06/what-you-need-know-about-trump-administrations-zer/>

By June 20th when President Trump halted separations more than 2500 children had been separated from their families. As of August 9th 559 kids were still separated from their families. The numbers do not include 103 “tender-age” children under the age of 5, whom the government is tracking separately. Information for that age group has not been recently released.

https://www.washingtonpost.com/graphics/2018/local/tracking-migrant-family-separation/?utm_term=.8bd1f2a31ff1