



the border project

new works by: susan harbage page

FLANDERS
GALLERY 

EXHIBITION STATEMENT

In 1883, in an effort to raise money for its base, poet Emma Lazarus described the Statue of Liberty in "The New Colossus" as the "Mother of Exiles," who beseeches the world to "Give me your tired, your poor, your huddled masses yearning to breathe free, the wretched refuse of your teeming shore." The poem evokes the influx of immigrants to America in the late nineteenth century and conjures images of crowded boats passing it on their way to Ellis Island. Over 120 years later, in a striking statement on contemporary immigration discussions, Susan Harbage Page exhibits images of empty riverbeds littered with the occasional cast-off garment.

Documenting and archiving objects found near the United States-Mexico border between Brownsville, Texas, and Matamoros, Mexico, Susan Harbage Page explores undocumented immigration's liminality through her photography. In these images, gone are the huddled masses. And what teeming there is of the shores occurs only in stolen, unseen moments for those willing to brave the dangerous journey. Page is no Lewis Hine putting a face to immigration; she instead documents the traces left behind by unseen bodies.

As migrants attempt to pass over the Rio Grande before allowing America to absorb them, they often shed both the functional tools of their journeys and the possessions describing their former lives. Whether it is the deflated inner tube, the toothbrush, the wallet, or the pocket change, these materials are evidence of plans and lives abandoned and yet-to-be redefined. Susan Harbage Page not only photographs these items, but she also collects them, amassing an archive of the transitional state.

By photographing the objects in situ, she provides an original context for the found objects. The on-site images record absence. Footprints and trampled undergrowth speak to the phantasms of hope and desperation that have already struggled to pass by. Images of the border's fences, which Page imposingly exhibits as an enlarged projection, remind viewers of the constantly roving border control authorities in this area. There is no official colossus to welcome this population; the comfort they find is provided by the crushed "nests" of nature that hide its people in moments of rest or panic.

After gathering the discarded detritus, Page re-photographs the materials in a studio space before tagging and storing the objects. The bare backdrops remove the temptation to spin narratives or weave back stories, which would possibly – and probably falsely – romanticize their histories. Where Emma Lazarus wrote a sonnet to memorialize a people, Page chooses instead to preserve tangible connections to them. Nonetheless, there is a tender inclusion in her second step of the project. In legitimatizing these objects through the tools and processes of institutional archives, Page is placing people perhaps best characterized by their absence in federal records into a structured system – albeit a system of her own creation.

The Border Project ultimately reveals much about the material goods chosen for the crossing, but they are important in emphasizing the intensely individual nature of these journeys, a nature that is completely foreign to the structured crowd control of Ellis Island past. By concentrating on the objects instead of subjects, Page's photography encourages such travelers to control their own destinies. Objects, and not specific people, will be forever captured as "immigrant" on film. And yet, due to Page's archival handling, these objects are like the invisible population they presumably describe, properly without a specific time or place; they are neither here nor there.

Lauren Turner
October 2011



WALLET AND CONTENTS, Brownsville, Texas, 2008



STRIPED CLOTHING, Brownsville, Texas, 2008



ARGYLE SOCK, Brownsville, Texas, 2007



ENTRANCE INTO THE UNITES STATES FROM THE RIO GRANDE, Brownsville, Texas, 2008



WHITE SHIRT, Brownsville, Texas, 2007



INNER TUBE, PATH AND BUGS, Laredo, Texas, 2011



RED SHIRT IN RIVER, San Ignacio, Texas, 2011



NEST NO. 3, Laredo, Texas, 2011



ARMY SURVEILLANCE TOWER, Roma, Texas, 2011



SOMBRA DI SR. SAN PEDRO SAINT, Laredo, Texas, 2011



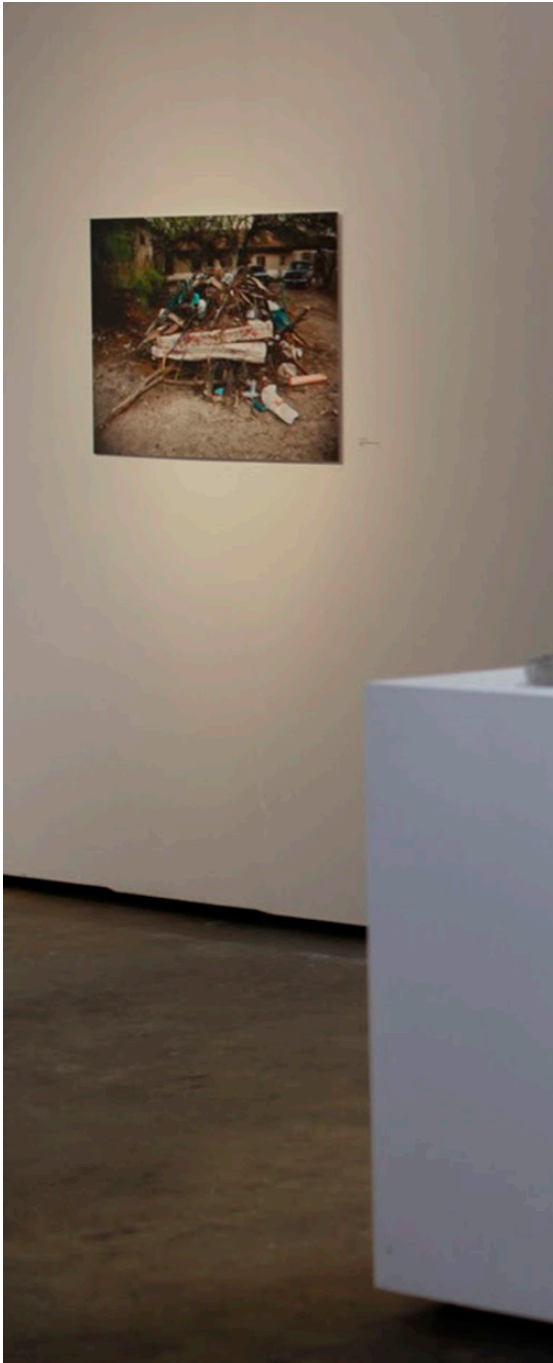
SOCK BURIED IN SAND, Laredo, Texas, 2011



KHAKI PANTS, Brownsville, Texas, 2010



BORDER FENCE WITH FOOTPRINTS, Brownsville, Texas, 2010





INSTALLATION VIEW, 2011



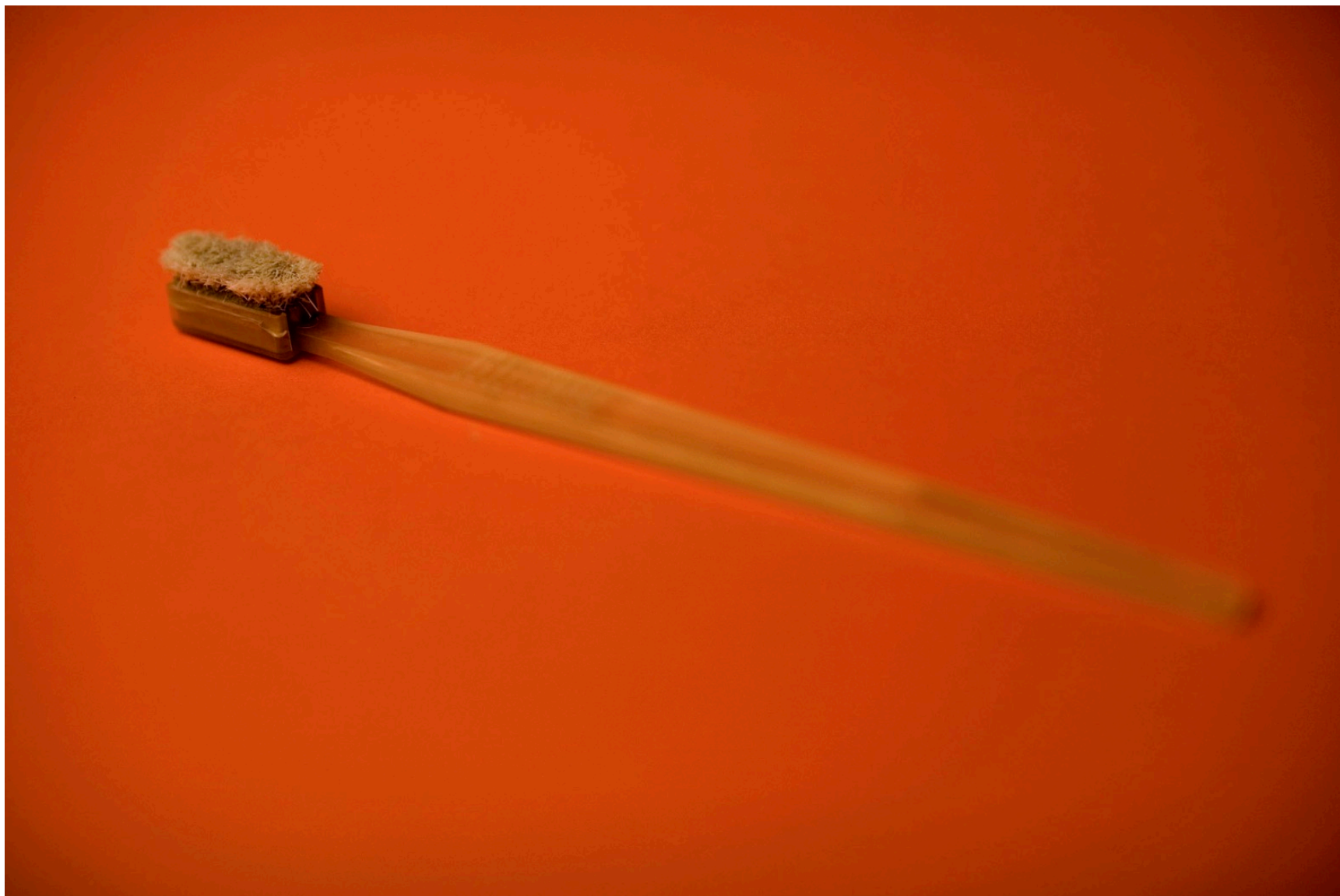
INSTALLATION VIEW, 2011



WOMEN'S SHOE, from the U.S. - Mexico Border Anti Archive, 2011



INNER TUBE, from the U.S. - Mexico Border Anti-Archive, 2011



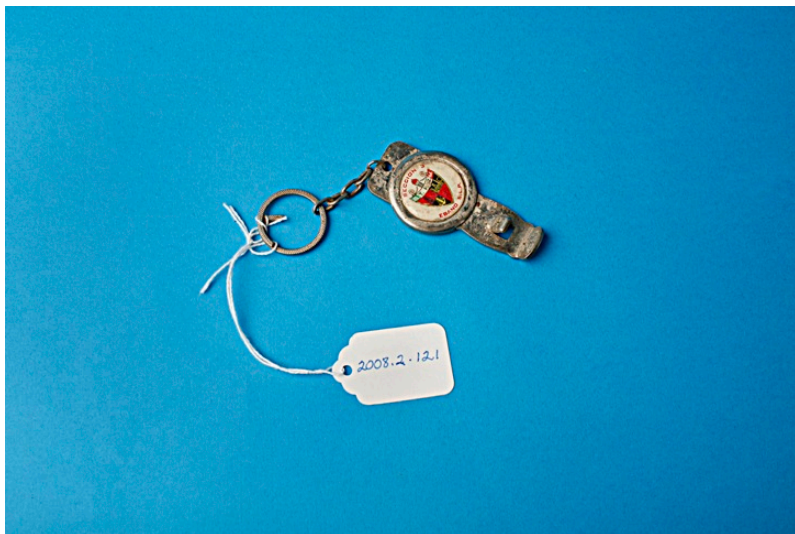
TOOTHBRUSH, from the U.S. - Mexico Border Anti-Archive, 2011



RED BRA, from the U.S. - Mexico Border Anti-Archive, 2011



INSTALLATION VIEW, 2011



OBJECTS FORM THE U.S. – MEXICO ORDER ANTI ARCHIVE, 2011

Object # 2008.2.72 (Detention Center Card) (Top)
Object # 2008.2.121 (Keychain) (Bottom)

Object # 2008.2.72 (Detention Center Card) (Top)
Object # 2008.2.125 (Black Plastic Bag with Belt attached) (Bottom)



Object # 2008.1.6 (Orange Shirt) (Top)
Object # 2008.1.7 (White Nike Sock) (Bottom)

Object # 2008. 1.4 (White Paper with Telephone Number) (Top)
Object # 2008. 1.4 (Man's Wallet) (Bottom)



TOY SOLDIER, Brownsville, Texas, 2011



TIRES DRAGGED ALONG ROADS BY THE BORDER PATROL TO SEE FRESH FOOTPRINTS, Brownsville, Texas, 2010



LAYTEX GLOVE, Brownsville, Texas, 2008



PATH, SANTA ANA NATIONAL WILDLIFE REFUGE, Alamo, Texas, 2007



PILE OF TRASH WITH MATTRESSES, HOSE, WATER BOTTLES, Roma, Texas, 2011

LONGING: Personal Effects from the Border

a photo essay by Bernard L. Herman

Editor's Note: For the past three years Susan Harbage Page has photographed the possessions left behind by people crossing the U.S.-Mexican Border near Brownsville, Texas, and Matamoros, Mexico. Immigrants swim across the Rio Grande and then quickly change from wet clothes into dry clothes and disappear into the general population. If stopped by the Border Patrol, they are asked to empty their pockets of everything non-essential. Page sees the resultant personal items strewn along the border "as symbols or relics not only of a changing culture but also of a longing for a better life, security for one's family, a safer environment." This work was supported in part by a research grant from the UNC Center for the Study of the American South.

Susan Harbage Page's portfolio, *Longing: Personal Effects from the Border*, is an intervention—at once aesthetic, archaeological, and archival—into the spaces and objects associated with the great migration north across the Rio Grande and into the United States. Page's images are visual conversations about the material culture of the immigrant experience and compel us to consider how we see ourselves through seeing others. Images of a deflated inner tube dropped by the road, a wallet mired, its contents spilling into the mud, footsteps revealed in soft earth, and river-wet clothes wrung, wadded, and cast aside document ordinary things possessed with extraordinary associations of flight, hope, panic, determination, and fear.

In collecting possessions discarded at the border and photographing them in her studio, Page transforms them, re-contextualizing found objects through a cool and loving curatorial eye. The artist becomes archivist. With the debris-field chaos of riverbank and border fence erased, inner tube, wallet, and shirt take on different associations drawn from the calm and analytical confines of the studio. These images evoke the strange and subdued violence of the museum, the morgue, the catalog. Side by side (imagine a diptych), the juxtaposition of images from field and studio reveal the spaces between the desperation of flight and the stillness of the archive—there, here, lost, found.

Longing speaks about power through the operations of borders, places where identities are furtive, hidden, gleaned only via jettisoned artifacts, first discarded and depersonalized, then retrieved and remembered. The visual space Page creates between the inner tube encountered in brush and sunlight and subsequently pedestaled on a shadow-edged blue background, delicately and revealingly lit by studio lamps, forces us to question how we must position ourselves to pursue the

always political work of seeing. Page locates that political work in what she describes as “contexts for viewing.” It is not just what we see that matters, but how our privileged vantage points contextualize her images and their content. In that gesture Susan Harbage Page makes us aware of how the frailties and vanities of our own habits of seeing reinforce unspoken ideologies of power.

If I could do it, I'd do no writing at all here. It would be photographs; the rest would be fragments of cloth, bits of cotton, lumps of earth, records of speech, pieces of wood and iron.

—James Agee, *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*

Front Cover Image

BORDER FENCE WITH FOOTPRINTS, Brownsville, Texas, 2010