

Grasslands - The Chihuahuan Desert Project

“No hay paso”. The voice is inflected ... it is not a command. They are not telling me that there is a ghost jaguar in the canyon or big trampas for bears in an apple orchard ... they are not telling me the stories that mean they grow narcotics hidden in a moist crack in the land beyond and if I were to try and go there...it would not be permitted. They are not telling me there are things I should not see.

I have learned to ask “Esta peligroso por un gringo?” I have learned to get the men and the young soldiers, the boys I call kids with guns, to laugh at my very bad Spanish. They always let me pass. I have an old truck, 400,000 miles. I can pull a wire, set a jug of water on the hood, and walk for a day, sometimes two, three is all I can manage. I carry an old 4x5 view camera and water, not much more. This is the desert ... the border of Mexico and the US. I can manage this territory. I feel safe here.

They are worried because they have never had a gringo stumble onto their ranch. They have a locked gate ... they tell me there are many locked gates.

I cannot speak spanish well enough to talk about art. I say I think there is some thing here ... something beautiful ... something important ... and I want to see it. What I cannot say is that I want to know if something still exists. In the morning I have seen a small herd of the berrenda, and a badger. A badger - three times in my life I have had a badger walk right up to me, sniff the air, and walk away as if I did not exist. It is a good sign. There is grass here ... a remnant of a great grassland. We call it a desert, the Chihuahuan desert, but it is a grassland of the greatest complexity. The day before I saw an aplomado falcon - I did not yet know its meaning - that there were only 18 pairs of these birds left, that they are the signifier of this grassland, and the grassland is dying.

They open the gate.

The Rocky Mountains slide down the continent like a glacier for three thousand miles before they break up into an archipelago of small ranges floating in a sea of grasslands. A couple hundred miles to the south the Sierra Madres rise up, serrating Mexico for another two thousand miles.

I have wandered this landscape - in between, where things fall apart - for a long time. On the west side lies the Sonoran desert with its giant saguaros, and on the east side lies the Chihuahuan Desert. Lately, I'm in love with the Chihuahuan Desert - a minimalist dream of small ranges and grasslands that no one seems to pay much attention to. This desert is like a Rothko painting or one of Serra's smooth black arcs - once you have begun to look closely it takes time to see what is there.

I can argue that this is the most complex collision of ecosystems on the planet. I can tell you that where there used to be ten thousand people there are now a million. I can tell you about the waters beneath closed basins that are mined for cities, and the plans to drain the aquifers dry under hundred thousand acre farms in exchange for only a few years of harvest. I can tell you what madness happens on the border of two great nations. I can tell you a lot of things ... none of it matters except the enduring silence.

Michael P. Berman

Michael P. Berman was born in New York City in 1956. In 1974 he went west to Colorado College where he studied biology. His photographs are included in the collections of the Metropolitan Museum of Art, the Amon Carter Museum and the Museum of New Mexico. He has received a 2008 Guggenheim Fellowship in photography, Painting Fellowships from the Arizona Commission on the Arts and the Wurlitzer Foundation; his installations, photographs and paintings have been reviewed in *Art in America*, and exhibited throughout the country. Photographs from his recent work from the Grasslands of the Chihuahuan Desert were published in *Trinity*, the third book of the border trilogy, *The History of the Future*, with the writer Charles Bowden, in 2009 UT, Austin