



*New American Scenery
Across the Borderline Series...*



Cumbrian Blue(s), New American Scenery, Across the Borderline, tetrptych. Inglaze decal collage on partially erased Vernon Kilns souvenir plates of California, Arizona, New Mexico and Texas. Alturas Foundation Collection.
Paul Scott 2019.

Background:

The *New American Scenery, Across the Borderline* series of artworks reference the international boundary line first drawn in the sand, and along the shifting banks of the Rio Grande river at the end of Mexican American War in 1848. They specifically depict the border fences first created after 2006, when President George Bush signed the *Secure Fence Act* intended to reduce illegal immigration to the United States from Mexico. The act initiated a boom in border construction and surveillance technology, so that by May 2011 there were 649 miles of barriers in place. Between the physical walls and fences, additional surveillance equipment alert US Border Patrol agents to suspected border crossings. A whole self contained, publicly funded economy had been created.

Early during my research for *New American Scenery*, Donald Trump was elected President of the United States. He promised to erect a wall along the whole length of the border and get the Mexican government to pay for it. Although by the end of his presidency, 452 miles of barriers had been constructed, most were replacements for existing structures. Only 80 miles of new barriers had been built where there were none before (including 47 miles of primary wall, and 33 miles of secondary wall built to reinforce the initial barrier). The cost: \$20 million a mile to the US Government.¹

So it is that the 1,954 miles from the Pacific to the Gulf of Mexico are marked by a series of intermittent vertical barriers. The original fences could be scaled by a teenager, without a ladder in 18 seconds flat.² In a region of deserts, mountains and rivers, an already already challenging

¹ <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-us-canada-46748492> and <https://www.npr.org/2020/01/19/797319968/11-billion-and-counting-trumps-border-wall-would-be-the-world-s-most-costly?t=1641638947190>

² Josh Kun in Misrach, Richard; Galindo, Guillermo; *Border Cantos*, Aperture Foundation New York, 2016, p11.

ecosystem is undoubtedly made more hostile by the physical impediments, the border surveillance technologies, and their application.

As of November 2021, 3,790 immigrants have died trying to cross the vast Arizona Sonoran Desert. Many more have not been found.³ The whole border region can now be mapped through RHR (Recovered Human Remains) maps.

Tribal lands of three indigenous nations are divided by the border fence. About 100 species of plants and animals, many already endangered, are threatened by the wall.

'The Border Wall, then, is not simply the material, built result of politically expedient legislation buttressed by defense budgets and national chauvinism. It is an ideological, social, and economic pressure point where the pulls and pushes of multiple political forces, past and present, converge in volatile and often tragic ways. To speak of the contemporary border is to speak of nineteenth-century U.S. expansionism and twentieth-century economic imperialism, decades of labor recruitment and labor deterrence, post-WWII industrialization and post-9/11 terror wars, pro-trade policies and anti-drug policies, Mexican drug supply and U.S. drug consumption, the pursuit of human rights and the violation of human rights, U.S. golf courses with their ninth holes in Mexico and two-bedroom American homes with the Border Wall in their backyard, and the open frontier of the Old West and the carceral frontier of the New West, where campfires become klieg lights and young mothers carry their infants across live gunnery ranges because, somehow, they're safer than the open desert.'⁴

Cumbrian Blue(s), the borderline, music and transferware:

The US Mexican border at El Paso is over 5000 miles away from my home in the north of England, but in these days of instant news and assorted digital media sources, images from the US/Mexico border have featured regularly on our British TV screens. Like many English people, I grew up with American movies, TV programmes and music, some set in these wild remote border landscapes. Included in the musical soundtracks that have accompanied my adult life has been the music of guitarist Ry Cooder, and the songs of Tom Russell.

In 1981 film director Tony Richardson commissioned Cooder to create a number of songs for the soundtrack of a new movie called *The Border* starring Jack Nicholson. 'He just said I want a song that tells the story of the film'⁵..... Freddy Fender's recording *Across the Borderline*⁶ was the result. I first really became aware of it in 1987 as a track on Cooder's album *Get Rhythm*, but I have returned to it again and again...

There's a place where I've been told
Every street is paved with gold
And it's just across the borderline
And when it's time to take your turn

³ <https://humaneborders.org>

⁴ Josh Kun in Misrach, Richard; Galindo, Guillermo; *Border Cantos*, Aperture Foundation New York, 2016, p12.

⁵ Ry Cooder, quoted in *American Tune*, an article by Richard Williams in the *Independent* on Sunday 5 July 1992. *Three songwriters pieced it together for a movie; it has never been a hit. So what is art about Ry Cooder's ballad that inspires Springsteen and Dylan to sing it and people to cry when they hear it?*

⁶ Written by Ry Cooder, Jim Dickinson, John Hiatt

BORDER
by RYAN COHEN

MEXICO

OLD MEXICO

UNITED STATES
(U.S.A.)
TEXAS
MEXICO

EL MUSICO

ACROSS THE BORDERLINE
HERE'S A LAND SO I'VE BEEN TOLD
THE STREET IS PAVED WITH GOLD
IT'S JUST ACROSS THE BORDERLINE
NOW IT'S TIME TO TAKE YOUR OWN
LESSON YOU MUST LEARN
WILD LOVE MORE THAN YOU CAN
EAT TO FIND
YOU FEEL THE BOTTLED PASSION AND
DRAMA SITS THROUGH YOUR EARS
WITH KNOWS IT'S TOO LATE
THAT YOUR MIND
YOU'VE PAID THE PRICES TO COME
FAR
KIND UP WHERE YOU ARE
STILL JUST ACROSS
THE LINE
I THE BIG GRANDE
FOOT PRINTS IN THE SAND
GET ME ONE DAY DEER
AND MAKE A BREATH
LIFE AND DEATH
USE TO CROSS

When you reach the broken promised land
And every dream slips through your hands
Then you'll know that it's too late to change your mind
'Cause you've paid the price to come so far
Just to wind up where you are
And you're still just across the borderline

Up and down the Rio Grande
A thousand footprints in the sand
Reveal a secret no one can define
The river flows on like a breath
In between our life and death
Tell me, who's the next to cross the borderline?

The song has since been performed and recorded by many other artists including Bob Dylan, Bruce Springsteen, Willie Nelson and Tom Russell. Russell, who lived in El Paso for many years had a close-up view of the issues around the U.S. border, and his music is seeped with the sounds of the borderlands. In 2006 he released an EP featuring *Across The Borderline*, segued with two other songs: *Who's Gonna Build Your Wall?* a defence of labouring immigrants and the absurdities of wall construction, along with the somber *California Snow* which narrates the tragedy through the eyes of a border patrolman and those on the uncertain quest for a promised land.

In 2017, with the support of an Alturas Foundation Artist in Residence grant⁷ I eventually travelled to visit these borderlands between the US and Mexico to see for myself. It was a discordant experience, with the theoretical familiarity engendered by reading, watching and listening made real by the visceral, physical evidence of being there.



At the Amistad Dam, Del Rio on the Mexican/United States border, 2 February 2017

Transferware and the border:

Cumbrian Blue(s) New American Scenery artworks update historical transferwares with narratives relevant to the 21st century. The *Across the Borderline* series has a *Trumpian Campaigne* subtitle alluding to recent border wall constructions and the title references a Staffordshire tableware pattern, *Texian Campaigne*. Produced between 1834 and 1852 by James Beech, Thomas Walker and Anthony Shaw, the wares supposedly depicted romanticized views of the 19th century Mexican/American war, (although research by the Transferware Collectors Club⁸ indicates that the designs were in fact appropriated from *Napoleon* tableware patterns relating to the French Revolution, and simply re-labelled *Texian Campaigne*). The original battle scenes are updated in a series of works in which *Texian* has become *Trumpian*.

⁷ <https://alturasfoundation.org/artists-in-residence/>

⁸ https://www.transferwarecollectorsclub.org/bulletin_previews/articles/TCCSummer08-feature.pdf



Texian Campaign, Battle of Resaca de la Palma, transferware platter by James Beech, c. 1840.



Cumbrian Blue(s), New American Scenery, Across the Borderline (Trumpian Campaign) No:2. Transferware collage on shell edged pearlware platter, c.1820, Alturas Foundation Collection, Paul Scott 2019.

The late 19th century saw revival of interest in early transferwares with a number of collector books advising on histories, patterns and series. As a result, new Staffordshire patterns of American subjects/places appeared in the early 20th century. Companies including Wedgwood and Spode employed US agents to garner orders, importers including Rowland Marsellus, Jon Roth, and Jones, McDuffee & Stratton commissioned souvenir plates from a range of British manufacturers.

Artworks in the Across the Borderline series:

The refugees and migrants peering through the border fences on some of the series, were appropriated from a number of these Wedgwood patterns. Ironically, the figures they are based on originally populated quintessentially American scenes including St Paul's School in Concord New Hampshire .



*St. Pauls School 1928. A Hockey Game. Transferware plate by Wedgwood.
Marked: Importers Jones, McDuffee & Stratton Co. Boston.*

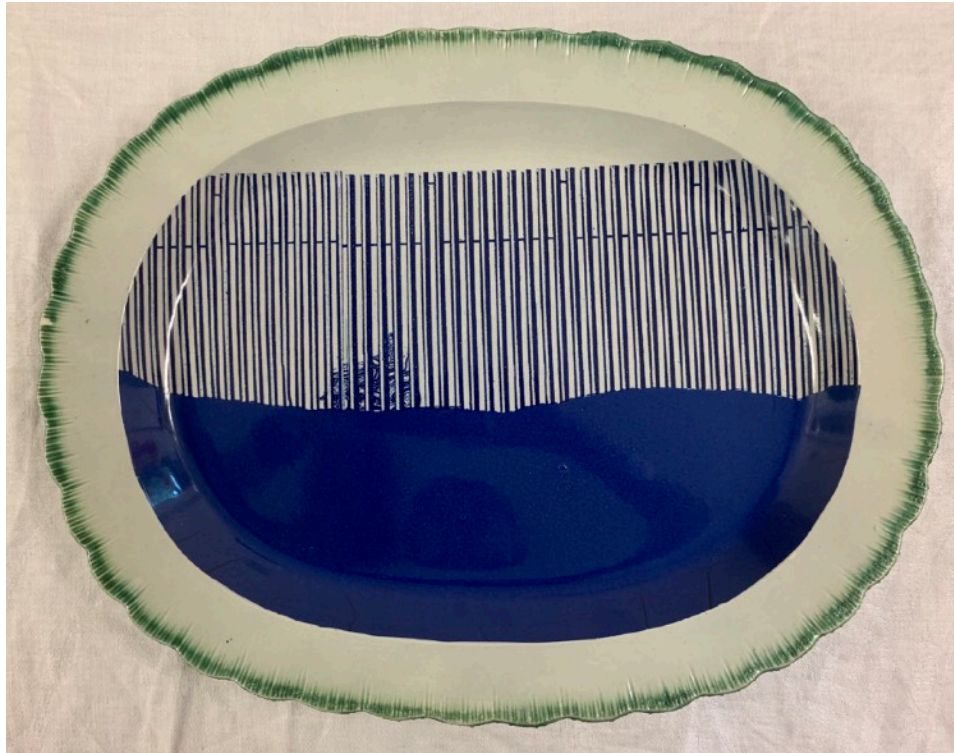


Vernon Kilns:

In the 20th century, souvenir wares were not only imported from England (Japan & China), but were also produced by a number of US manufacturers including Vernon Kilns of California. One of the *Across the Borderline* works uses four border state plates in a tetraptych



Cumbrian Blue(s), New American Scenery, Across the Borderline, details from tetraptych, top: *California*, below: *Texas*. Transferware collage on partially erased Vernon Kilns souvenir plates, Alturas Foundation Collection . Paul Scott 2019.



Cumbrian Blue(s), New American Scenery, Across the Borderline (Trumpian Campaign) No:1. Transferware collage on shell edged pearlware platter, c.1820, Peabody Essex Museum Collection, Paul Scott 2019.

Grass Cutting:

During my travels in the United States I soon became aware of the American obsession with cut grass and the proliferation of mowing equipment in all sorts of places. I saw tractors with mower attachments, parked in the middle of rural highways as well as vast swathes of cropped greenness in both urban and rural (sometimes very remote) locations. I recall rows of gleaming new mowing machines lining the roadside at retailers from Massachusetts to Texas. I then became aware of watered golf courses and garden lawns in American gardens alongside the border fence, juxtaposed with arid desert.

Wider Resonances:

In Richard Williams' 1992 article *American Tune*, he alluded to wider meanings and resonances of Ry Cooder, Jim Dickinson and John Hiatt's *Across the Borderline* song. In a similar way the *Cumbrian Blue(s) Borderline* works sadly also reference other walls and fences that have sprung up around the world in recent times. The artworks themselves also form part of a wider series examining the plight of refugees and those fleeing conflict in search of a safer life in other locations.



Cumbrian Blue(s), Palestine 2016. In-glaze decal collage and gold lustre on partially erased Stevenson *Palestine* bowl c.1820 265mm. dia. Paul Scott 2016



Cumbrian Blue(s) Refugee Series No:4. Transferware collage on pearlware shell edge platter c.1820. 405mm x 323mm Paul Scott 2021.

No Human Being is Illegal:



Cumbrian Blue(s), New American Scenery, Forget Me Not, No Human Being is Illegal. Transferware, salvaged Syracuse China with pearlware glaze, 30cm dia. Paul Scott 2019.

In June 2019, the grim reality of the migration crisis unfolding on America's southern border was captured in a photograph showing the lifeless body of a Salvadoran father and his daughter who drowned as they attempted to cross the Rio Grande into Texas. The images showed Óscar Alberto Martínez Ramírez, 26, and his daughter Valeria, lying face down in shallow water. The 23-month-old toddler's arm was draped around her father's neck, suggesting that she was clinging to him in her final moments.

The image of Ramez and Valeria appear in two border cartouches of *Forget Me Not, No Human Being is Illegal*. In the central panel is a quote from professor, political activist, Nobel laureate and Holocaust survivor Elie Wiesel: Wiesel, who had seen children hung in the death camps, told undocumented immigrants: *You, who are so-called illegal aliens, must know that no human being is illegal. That is a contradiction in terms. Human beings can be beautiful or more beautiful,*

they can be fat or skinny, they can be right or wrong, but illegal? How can a human being be illegal?

Wiesel's clarity grew out of his fear that once people were described as "illegal" there was no end to the abuse they might be forced to endure. He told CNN journalist Maria Hinojosa that the media should never use the term "illegal immigrant." When she asked why not, he said:

Because once you label a people 'illegal,' that is exactly what the Nazis did to Jews.' You do not label a people 'illegal.' They have committed an illegal act. They are immigrants who crossed illegally. They are immigrants who crossed without papers. They are immigrants who crossed without permission. They are living in this country without permission. But they are not an illegal people.⁹

Paul Scott January 2022.

⁹ <https://longislandwins.com/news/national/no-human-being-is-illegal-and-elie-wiesel/>