

Jonathan Reeve Price

The Liquid Border

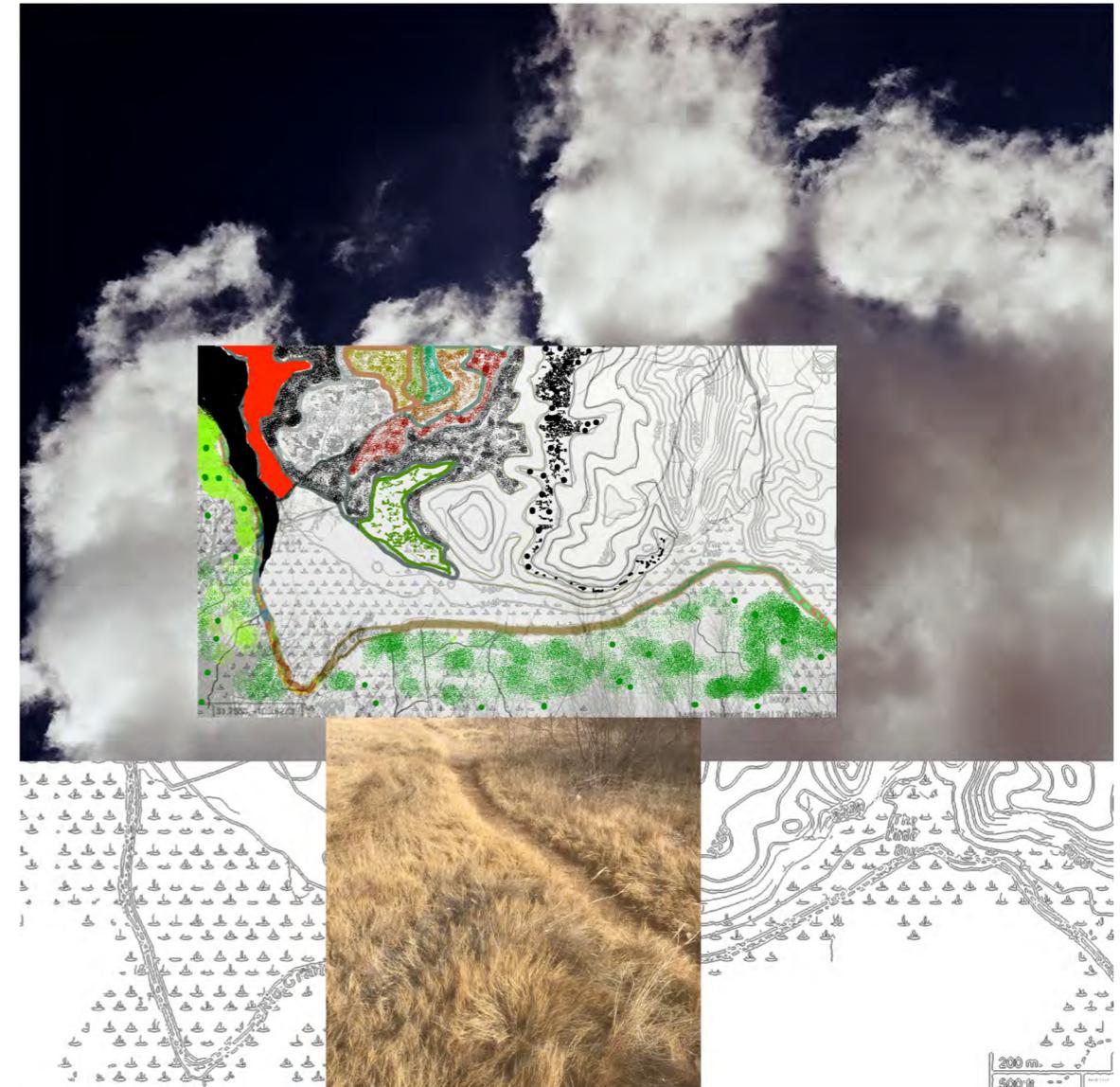
In a series of images and texts, Jonathan Reeve Price explores the liquid border—the imaginary line drawn down the middle of the Rio Grande as it passes between Texas and Mexico. Starting with topographical maps from the United States Geological Service, and satellite pictures from NASA, Price zooms in on the ripples in the river, the steep cliffs and undulating desert on both banks, and the odd unnatural beauty of the digital representations from 30,000 feet.

His images and texts may help us imagine the people struggling across the river, and the trackers from the Border Patrol waiting on the American side. This exhibition is an homage to all their treks.

Kirkus Review: "How do you cut a river in half? You can't, of course—which makes the paradox of the Rio Grande even more painful in Price's thoughtful, poignant new book of poetry and digital art. The poet refers to that river, which makes up much of the physical border between the United States and its southern neighbor: "Throughout most of the river's run to the Gulf of Mexico," Price writes, "the border is in the middle of the flow, invisible, but real." ...Price's volume seeks to map that liminal space in imagery and verse. Roughly half the book is given over to digital images; in them, the artist stitches together cartographs, photographs, and satellite images, many of them altered, to evoke the strange space between the two countries. Price calls these pieces "imaginary" maps and argues that they document "something close to reality, but not all there." Accompanying the visuals are roughly a dozen thoughtful, poignant poems, many of which capture the torturous experience of those seeking entry into America. ...Price is as adept with his poetry as he is with his pictures, and the combination is a moving testimony to the struggle of those who yearn for a better life elsewhere. A mournful, beautiful, and original synthesis of word and image."--Kirkus Reviews



Jonathan Reeve Price started his career with a Doctorate of Fine Arts from Yale, and he has exhibited map works at dozens of galleries and museums. In addition to his conceptual and public art, Price has written books on subjects such as video art, theater, and computer software. At Apple, he created the style guide for documentation. His high-tech clients are an A-to-Z of major computer companies in the U.S. and Japan. He lives with his wife Lisa and their Corgis, next to the Rio Grande in New Mexico.



The Rio Grande from El Paso to the Gulf of Mexico

The Liquid Border

The Rio Grande from El Paso to the
Gulf of Mexico

A Museum Zero Exhibition

Copyright

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Welcome

I am exploring the liquid border—the imaginary line drawn down the middle of the Rio Grande as it passes between Texas and Mexico. Real, but invisible, the border floats away.

But what pain comes across that unmarked frontier, what desperation, what determination! Exploring the photos and satellite data of this mighty river may help us imagine the people struggling across the river, and the trackers from the Border Patrol waiting on the American side.

I live next to the Rio Grande. In summers, there are stretches of the river that go dry, drained to irrigate chile fields. But more streams pour in from Mexico, bringing the river back to life. It staggers as it gets near to the Gulf of Mexico, but persists.

In the center of the river, we have no flag, no wall, no barrier. But our Border Patrol motors through in small skiffs, deterring migrants, and, quite often, picking up the bodies of people who went into the river, but could not swim.

My neighbors go down to El Paso and cross on the Bridge of International Friendship, to buy antibiotics, get their teeth cleaned, celebrate with their cousins. Other folks came across long ago, and they are part of our community, not aliens. In fact, some families came here in the 16th century, fleeing the Spanish Inquisition, passing for Catholic conversos, hiding out along this river, so far from the capital of Mexico, and the conquistadors, with their horses and priests.

When I look at maps of the border region, I recall the stories of all these people going and coming, the voices of the young men looking for work, the cries of the families fleeing gangs in Latin America, and the children we pull away from their families to put into cages. I hear their words as I work.

When there's peace, the border can be invisible. But artists and politicians make it visible again. One example: To make the three-hundred mile Northern Irish border visible, Suzanne Lacy persuaded several hundred people to wear yellow, run horses through yellow pigment, and paddle around in yellow boats, leaving a yellow trail across the boundary that has been the cause of so much grief. She projected satellite maps marked with the yellow line onto the front of the Ulster Museum, in Belfast.

For the stateless, the border is transcendent. Having been forced out of her homeland, Mona Hatoun says that she now feels rootless. But, she says, "The nomadic existence suits me fine, because I do not expect myself to identify completely with any one place." Instead, she seizes on the maps that airlines use to show their routes around the world, photocopies them, and

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adds her own colored lines, and squiggles, emphasizing the journey, not the territory.

Working on an iMac, I use a wide range of software to dig into LandSat Orbiter images, and U.S. Geological Survey topographical studies.

I distort the original, useful, scientific images, taking them apart and rebuilding them with half a dozen applications, just to see what I can discover in the bitmaps, vectors, color palettes, and the spray of code. I struggle with the counterpoint of paint and pixel, the contrast between the prose label and the visual detail, the interaction between what we know and what we see. My prints are markers on the trail, not final destinations.

I love the data. All those stacks of zeroes and ones add up to individual pixels, like dots of paint on a canvas, ready to be manipulated, distorted, shifted, and transformed. As I explore these artificial representations of the physical world, I get to view the scene up close, then far away; I soar to 30,000 feet, and then I wade through the reeds.

As I zoom in and out through so many levels, I carve paths through the imaginary space, to lead attention on. My goal is to bring out the patterns in the natural landscape, the odd unnatural beauty of its digital representations, and the unseen souls struggling below. Compassion, then, and, yes, an odd joy. I want to give your eyes the pleasure of repeated visual tours, and, along the way, to lighten your spirits with tiny beautiful sparks.

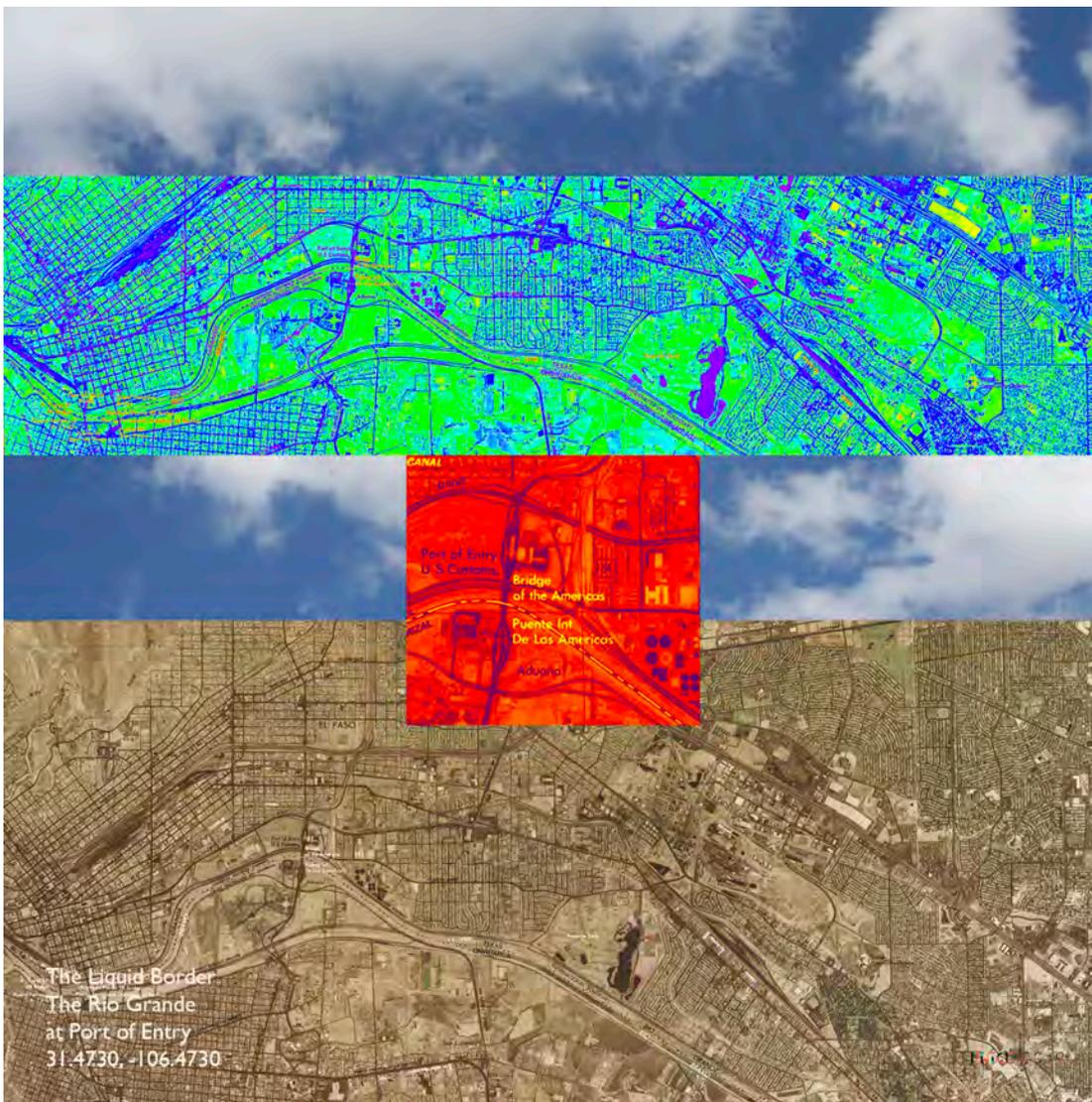
—Jonathan Reeve Price

The Liquid Border

The Rio Grande from El Paso to the Gulf of Mexico

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El Paso Port of Entry



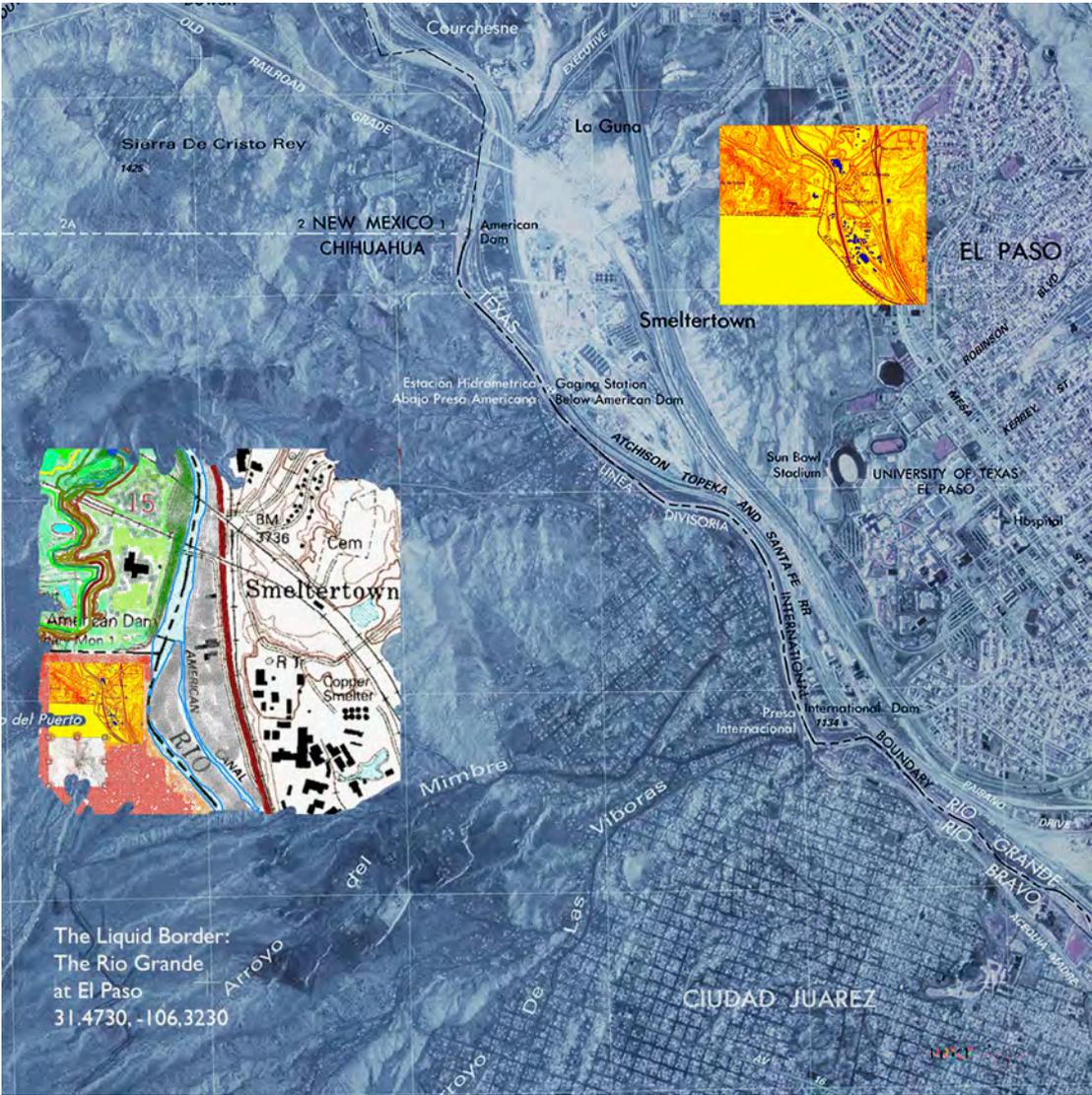
Jonathan Reeve Price, *El Paso Port of Entry*, 2019, Aluminum Print, 24 x 24 inches

*The city floats in the air, translucent.
Our satellite illuminates its flows—
water, and tires, and feet, and trains.
This algorithm burns the slums blue, softening
suburbs, defining the barren spaces .
with a false-color—green.*

*The bloody bridge of the Americas
brings us down to dirt. True brown,
grey, and pale white show El Paso and
Ciudad Juarez, two cities, one land.
Who can tell the two apart? Line and shade
make imaginary lines into razor wire and glare.
Hues deceive; these patterns suggest, but hide
the figures walking across this ground.*

Jonathan Reeve Price

The El Paso Blues



Jonathan Reeve Price, *The El Paso Blues*, 2019, Aluminum Print, 24 x 24 inches

*Art, thank God, promises indifference,
but when we zoom in, aesthetic distance dies.
The river turns from New Mexico to Texas,
pivots from Chihuahua to the Gulf. The copper smelter
makes this air taste of blood. The long shallow flow
stumbles over the American dam, outpaces
the hydrology gauges, and tracks the Atchison,
Topeka, and Santa Fe. Our camera watches
the blocks, streets, ridges, sand. go by, unaware
of any border. But science adds text strings,
that is, lies, masquerading as intelligence. Yes, labels
distinguish water from land, and pinpoint the linea
divisoria. Like politicians, these words separate
the citizens of this double ciudad
from each other, and us. Who can say what drives
a man from Dallas, Texas, to cross the state,
enter this Walmart, and kill? Oh great river, howl!*

Rio Grande and Río Bravo



Jonathan Reeve Price, *The Liquid Border: Rio Grande and Río Bravo*, 2019, Aluminum Print, 24 x 24 inches

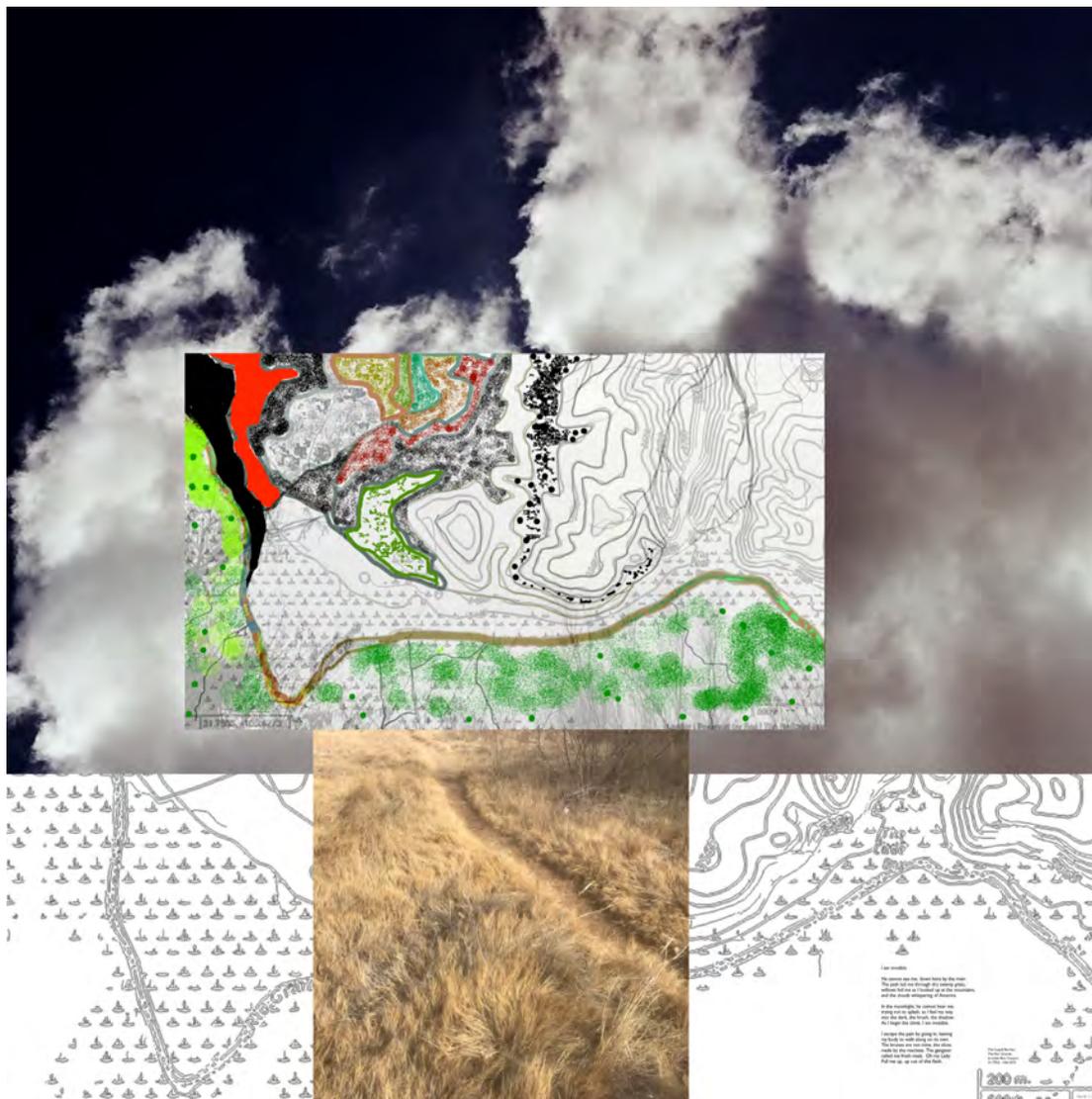
The river comes down from the North, through New Mexico, where we call it the Rio Grande. But as soon as it hits El Paso and turns East, it takes on two names, both in Spanish: Rio Grande, and Río Bravo del Norte. The map shows both. Which name do you use? Depends on where you come from—and which side of the border you live on.

Throughout most of the river's run to the Gulf of Mexico, the border is in the middle of the flow, invisible, but real.

*Hell is a mighty river.
What I want, who I am, what I see—
These visions roar past, asking me
to let go, to forget my name.
Grand or brave, wide or fierce,
this river beats against me.
Up ahead, in gulps, I see
the wire fence, the bridge,
the lights of the Dollar Store,
the smoke from a refinery.
But my arms give way, and the water
pulls me down, turns me around.
Thrashing, I cannot see the surface,
the sunlit city, the green shore.*

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Little Box Canyon



Jonathan Reeve Price, *The Liquid Border: Little Box Canyon*, 2019,
Aluminum Print, 24 x 24 inches

31.7553, -106.4273

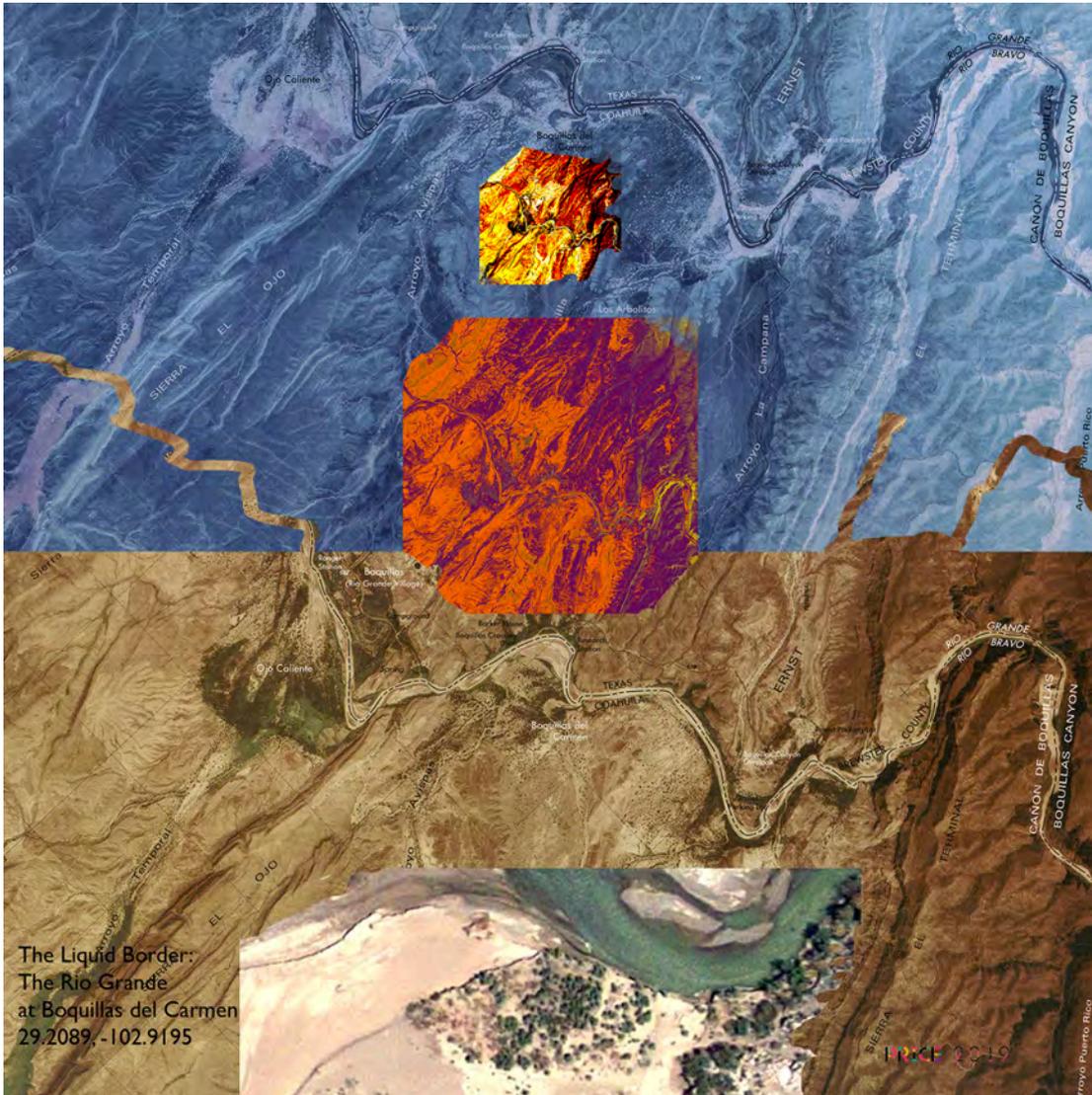
*The path led me through dry swamp grass.
Willows hid me as I looked up at the mountains,
and the clouds whispering of America.*

*In the moonlight, he cannot hear me,
trying not to splash, as I feel my way
into the dark, the brush, the shadow.
As I begin the climb, I am invisible.*

*I escape the pain by going in, leaving
my body to walk along on its own.
The bruises are not mine, the slices
made by the machete. The gangster
called me fresh meat. Oh my Lady
pull me up, up out of this flesh.*

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Boquillas del Carmen

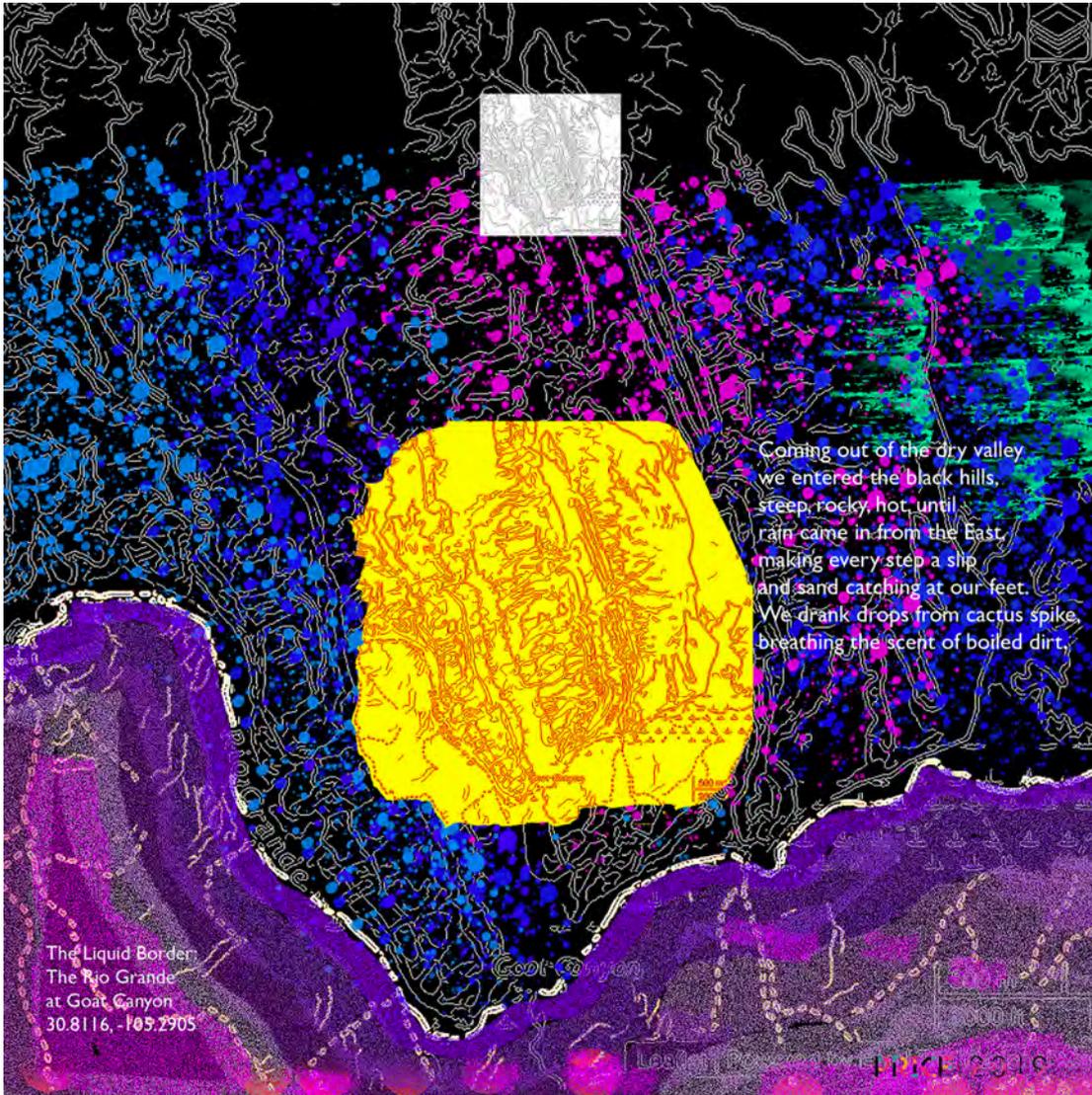


Jonathan Reeve Price, *The Liquid Border: Boquillas del Carmen*, 2019, Aluminum Print, 24 x 24 inches

29.2089, -102.9195

*Laughing, we drove four hours
through eight hundred thousand acres of desert,
the Big Bend National Park. Dead-ended
at a million-dollar complex, called
The Port of Entry. Slid our passports
into the scanner, talked with the agent
online, got his OK and went down
the switchback path to the river.
The water was warm; we could have waded.
But the man on the folding chair poled
his metal boat from Mexico to Texas,
so we could cross to the village.
We got enchiladas and beer and embroideries
showing roosters and javelinas and a cap
saying No Wall. We looked South:
High cliffs rising up in front of even higher cliffs.
They call their mountains the Sierra del Carmen.
On the boat ride back, I reached down
into the brown flow, and touched mud.
We could have walked across.*

Goat Canyon



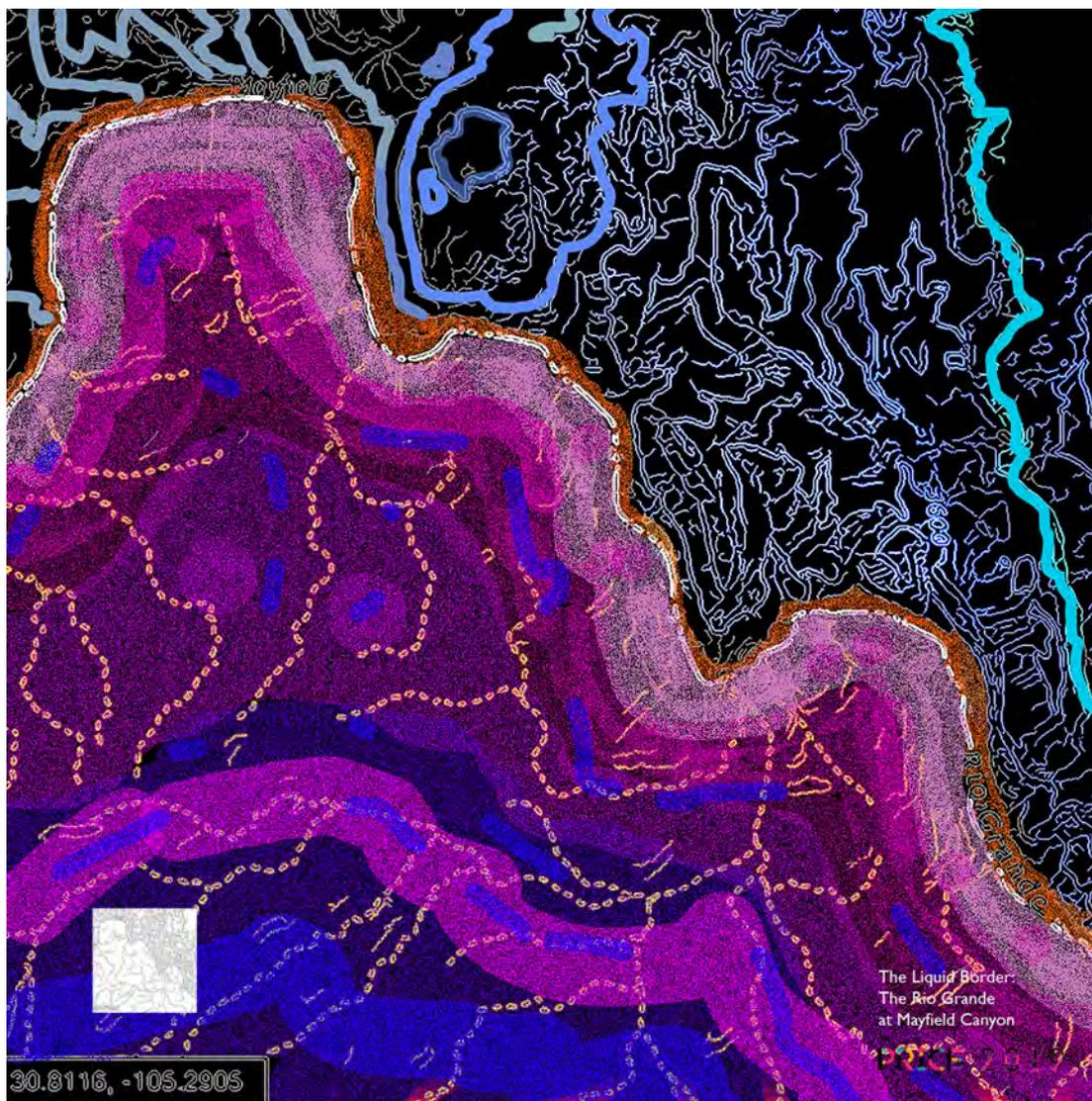
Jonathan Reeve Price, *The Liquid Border: Goat Canyon*, 2019,
Aluminum Print, 24 x 24 inches

30.8116, -105.2905

*Coming out of the dry valley
we entered the black hills,
steep, rocky, hot, until
rain came in from the East,
making every step a slip
and sand catching at our feet.
We drank drops from a cactus spike,
breathing the scent of boiled dirt.*

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Mayfield Canyon



Jonathan Reeve Price, *The Liquid Border: Mayfield Canyon*, 2019,
Aluminum Print, 24 x 24 inches

30.8116, -105.2905

*Through dust, through mud,
gravel, stone, and plowed field,
over the small stream,
rock by rock, I approach.*

*Blessed by the padre, given magic
by my cousin, the curandera,
holding our Lady firm between my eyes,
step by step, I advance.*

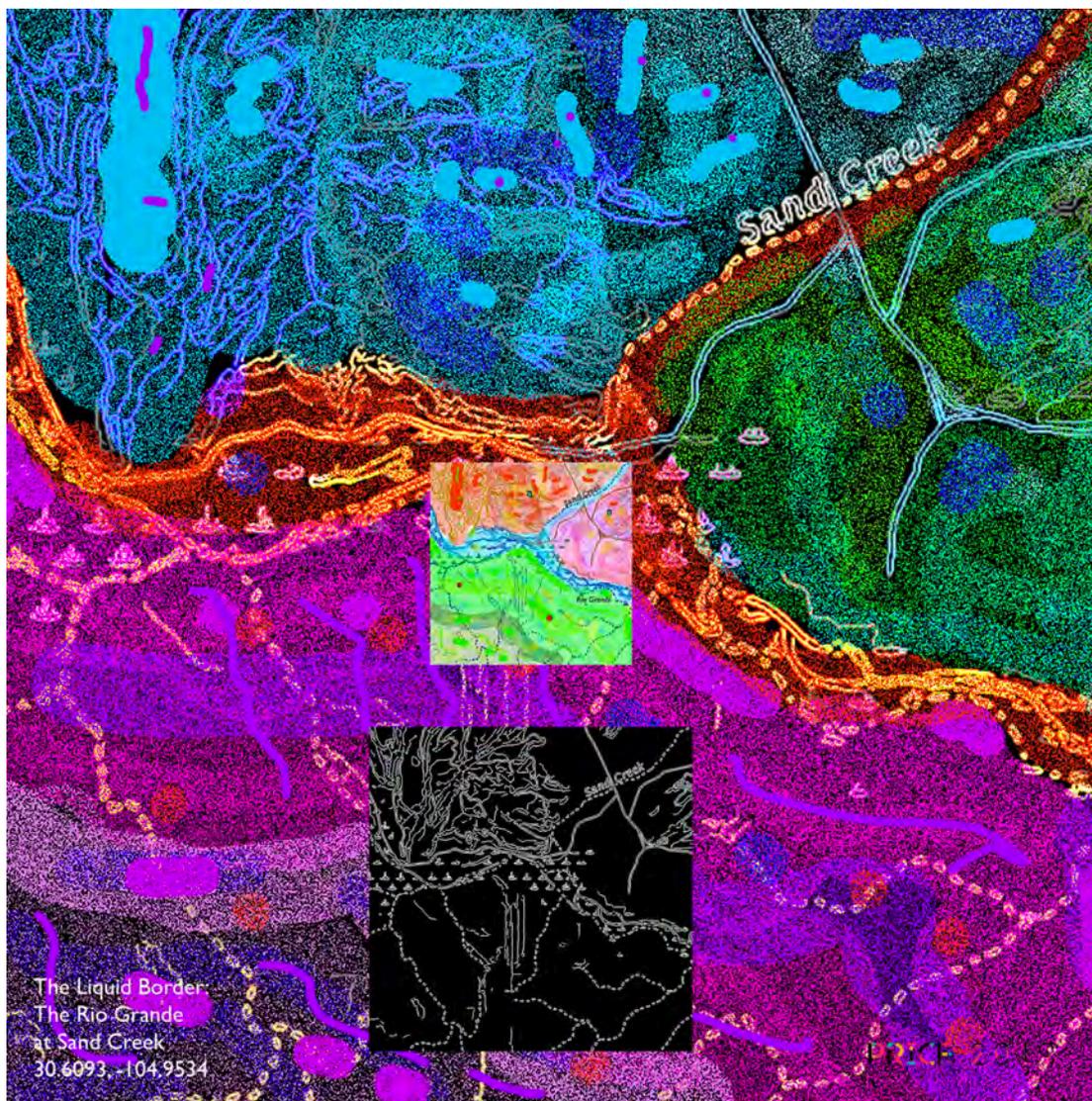
*My brother Hunger, my angel Lupe,
slowly, day after day, town
after town, forward we go,
step by step, we press on.*

*Through the dead brush, the spikes
of cactus, the sharp-teethed leaves,
down the small bank, to the silver river,
step by step, we slip in.*

*How cold it is, how strong
this fast mud, how soft the sand.
We hold hands, like a bridge,
and, step by step, we advance.*

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Sand Creek



Jonathan Reeve Price, *The Liquid Border: Sand Creek*, 2019, Aluminum Print, 24 x 24 inches

30.6093, -104.9534

*The hills ahead, the swamp
around us, this shallow, wide river
unrolling past us—no one
looking at us from the willow thicket,
or the grey cliff beyond—no car,
only the late afternoon sun
shining like all the pieces of that mirror
I broke at the master's house, glittering
like birds settling on the rooves
of our dear valley, our dead village.
We are the ripples, not the flow.
At night, we make our way across, not knowing
how we will climb out, or crawl
up some root, just pressing darkly on.*

Arroyo San Carlos



Jonathan Reeve Price, *The Liquid Border: Arroyo San Carlos*, 2019, Aluminum Print, 24 x 24 inches

30.3310, -104.7868

*When the rust ate the corn sprouts,
we knew it was time to leave.
But we did not.*

*When Carina was taken away,
screaming, when we found her body
stuck on a cross behind the church,
oh my little sister,
we knew it was time to leave.
But we did not.*

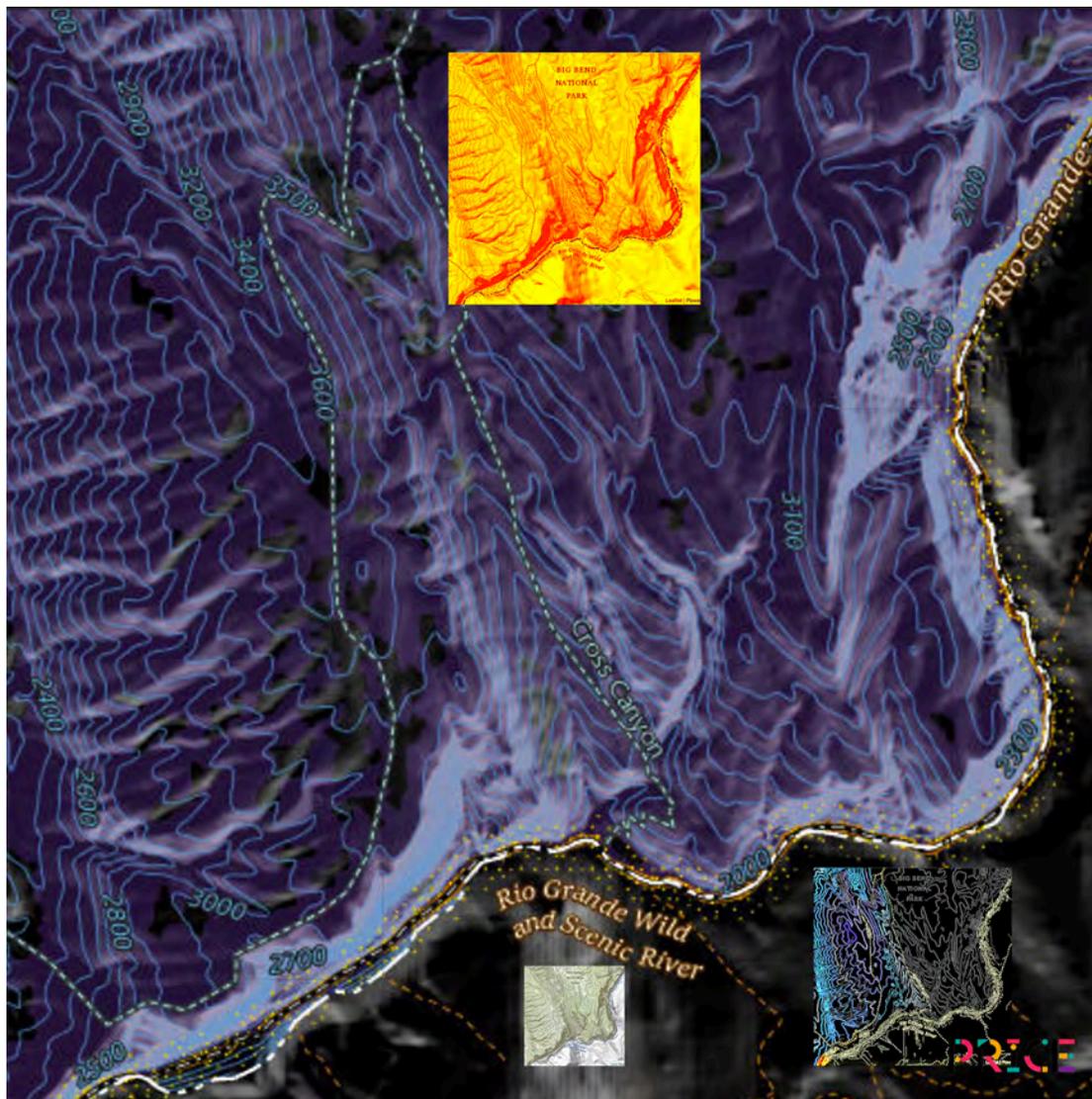
*Bleach and gasoline, oh Lady
of Guadalupe, sparkling
in your upright nicho,
you told us it was time to leave.
But we did not.*

*The flames came across the field,
the smoke familiar, the black line
advancing—but when the ground
sat there, smoking, the rains
washed ash into the hut, and
we knew it was time to leave.
But we did not.*

*Rebuilding the roof, scraping clear
the floor, pulling our two pots
out of the burnt pile, our old home,
we knew it was time to leave.
But we did not.*

*Only then, when the gang
drove their 4x4 over my son,
did I gather up our rope shoes,
and, hand in hand, the four of us,
Anna limping, Roderigo, Benicia, and I,
we set off down the mountain,
and, finding the impossible highway,
we started our long walk north.*

Cross Canyon



Jonathan Reeve Price, *The Liquid Border: Cross Canyon*, 2019,
Aluminum Print, 24 x 24 inches

28.9927, -103.1512

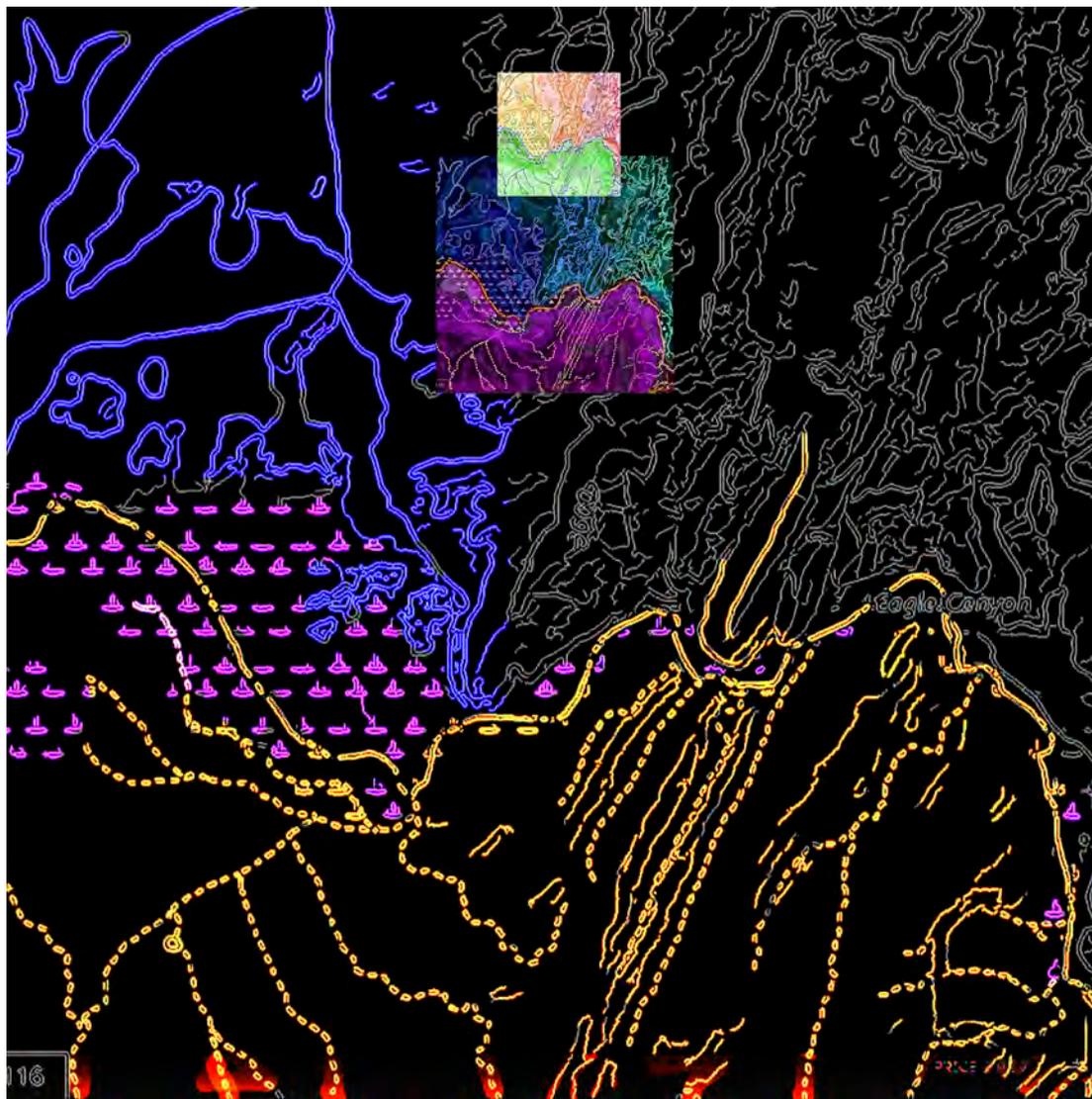
*I felt nothing when I pulled
the rusty, wrinkled roof
off, tumbled it into
the ravine, onto the burnt car—
Nothing for our time together,
the wet mud, the slipping damp
walls—down they came.
So easy to get rid of a house—
The sun inside my head
led me down the trail, my bundle,
my life in a roll of cloth.*

*I passed the cemetery—nothing—
Our church, a shell, the padre
a disease, the cross nothing.*

*How vacant my village, as I
came out of the forest and slid
down the red sand, onto the two-track road,
no farewell, no sigh, nothing.*

*On I went, my feet finding the road
down, around the curve, past
the cliff that took Maria's life,
nothing rose out of the morning mist,
just my breath, and deep within my head,
the continuous flame.*

Eagle Canyon

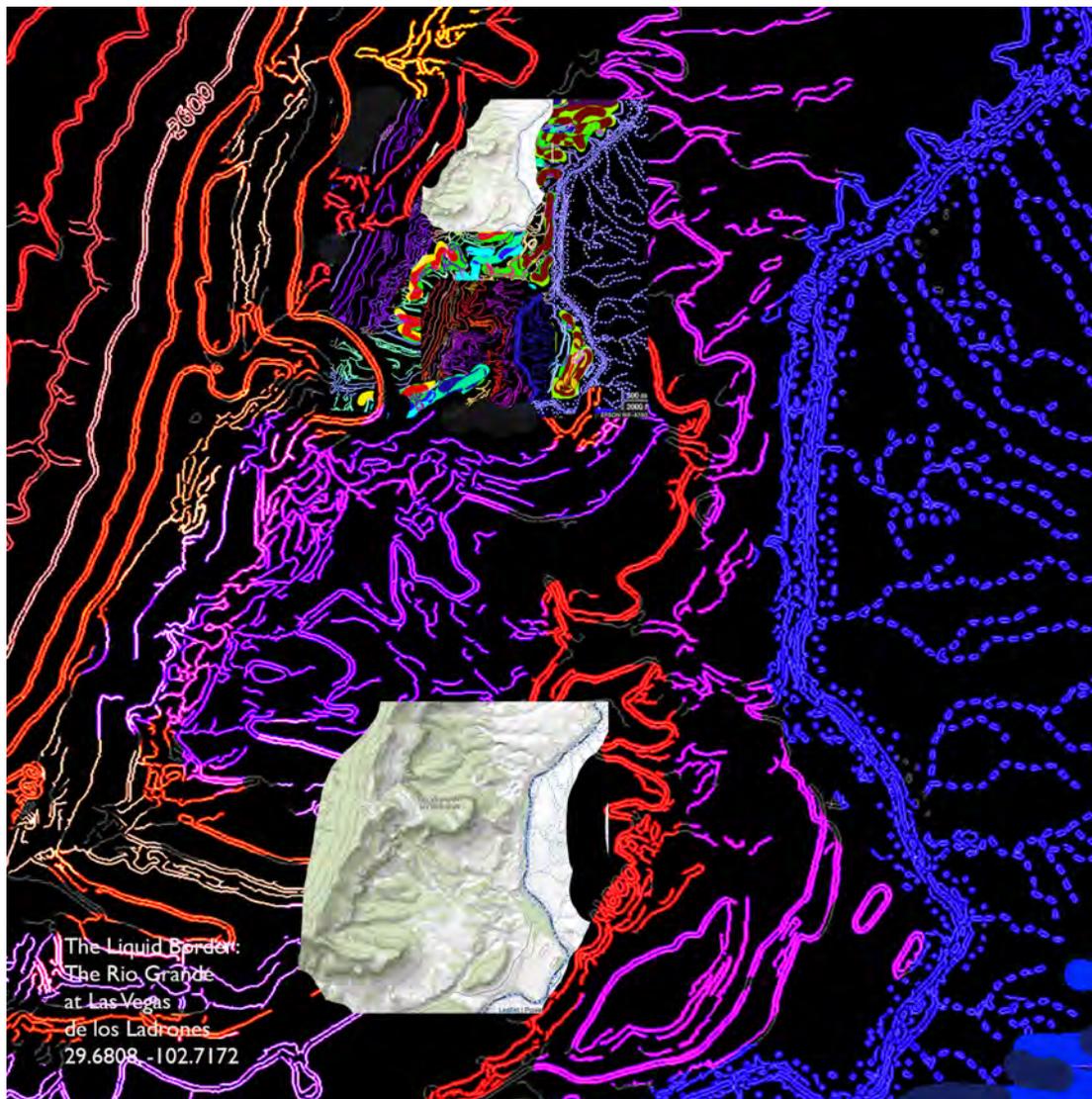


Jonathan Reeve Price, *The Liquid Border: Eagle Canyon*, 2019,
Aluminum Print, 24 x 24 inches

*Green as broomweed in light rain, slick
as coral bean, soft as deer grass, you
stumble, wake up, press on, past
this four-nerve daisy, and the silk tassels
of eggleaf, honeysuckle, and the narrow leaves
you know as snake herb, apache plume, prickly pear.
Where is the foot, how do the toes
feel forward through gravel, sand, and sorrow?
Is the curly mesquite yours? This coyote willow?
You pry open the Sierra Madre yucca,
poke open the silver lace cactus, drink
wooly locoweed. You are no longer five,
or four, footing it through this Chihuahuan arroyo.
Your mind blends with each bud, but your legs
stiffen, and slow. The Tarahumara sage nods,
indifferent to your passing by. And when you rest,
the landscape buzzes with the water running off,
and when you close your eyes, you hear one last bee.*

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Las Vegas de los Ladrones

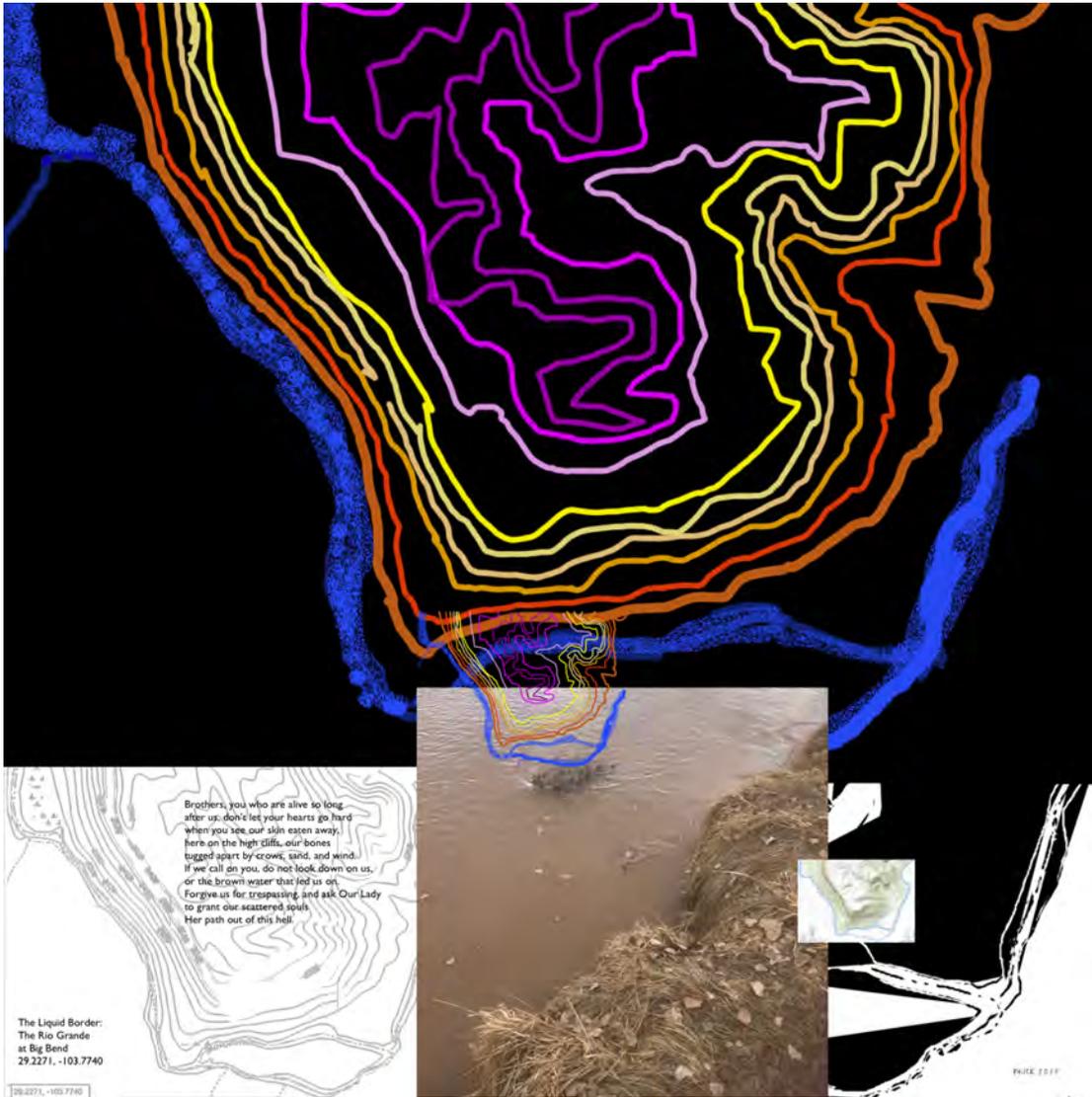


Jonathan Reeve Price, *The Liquid Border: Las Vegas de los Ladrones*, 2019, Aluminum Print, 24 x 24 inches

*This valley of thieves brings water
Down to the Rio Grande.
Their old hide-out has no roof, the walls
Tipped in, made of rock and branch.
On the beach, the necks of
broken bottles poke out of the sand.
We sprawl on the wet ledge, scooping
Water in, ignoring ghosts, letting
Moonlight hint but hide the lines of cliffs.
I doze, imagining I am a spirit
Stealing past the patrol, zooming
Over the ridge, free as the dead.*

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Big Bend



Jonathan Reeve Price, *The Liquid Border: Big Bend*, 2019, Aluminum Print, 24 x 24 inches

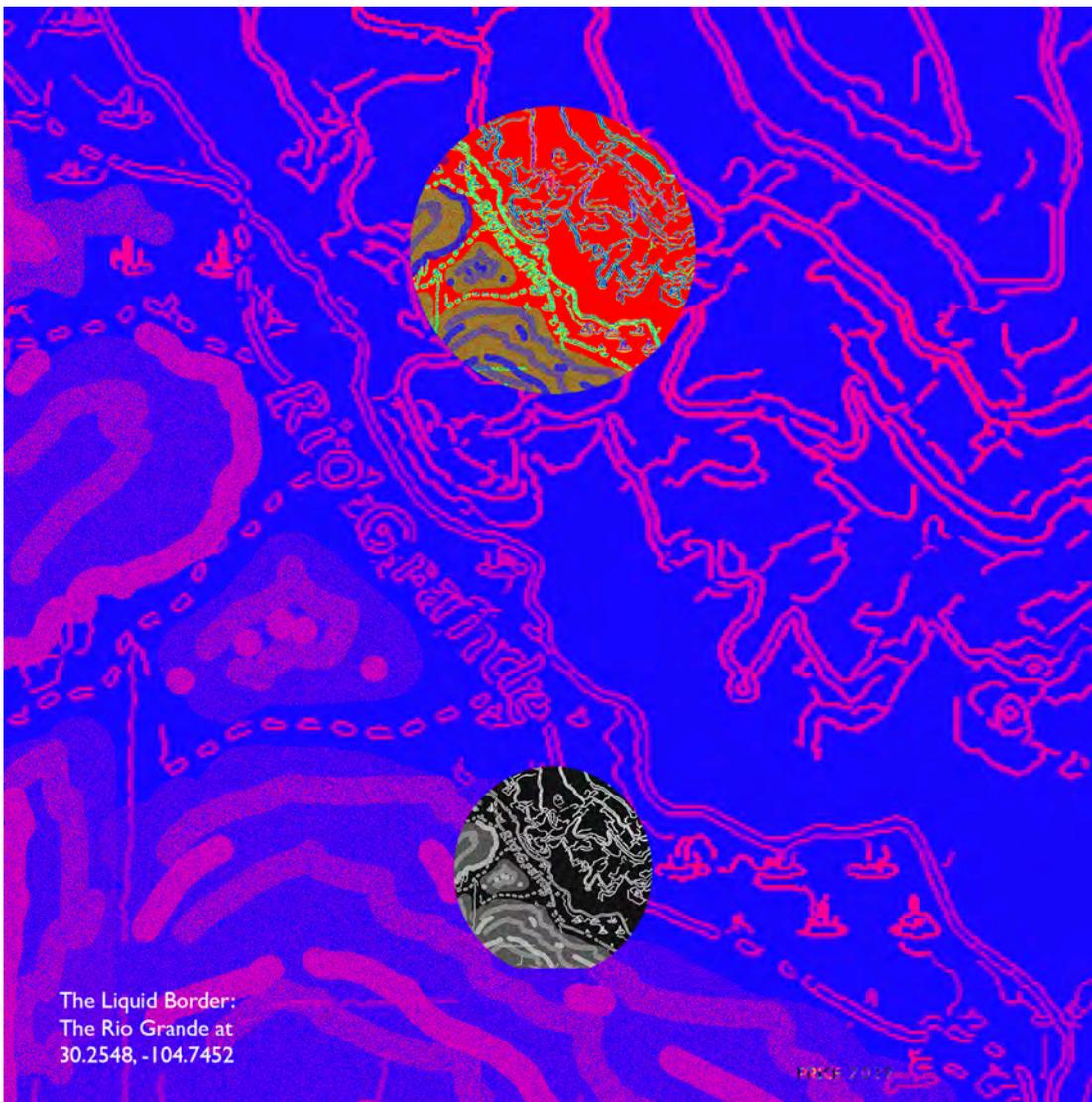
29.2271, -103.7740

*Brothers, you who are alive so long
after us, don't let your hearts go hard
when you see our skin eaten away,
here on the high cliffs, our bones
tugged apart by crows, sand, and wind.*

*If we call on you, do not look down on us,
or the brown water that led us on.
Forgive us for trespassing, and ask Our Lady
to grant to our scattered souls
Her path out of this hell.*

Jonathan Reeve Price

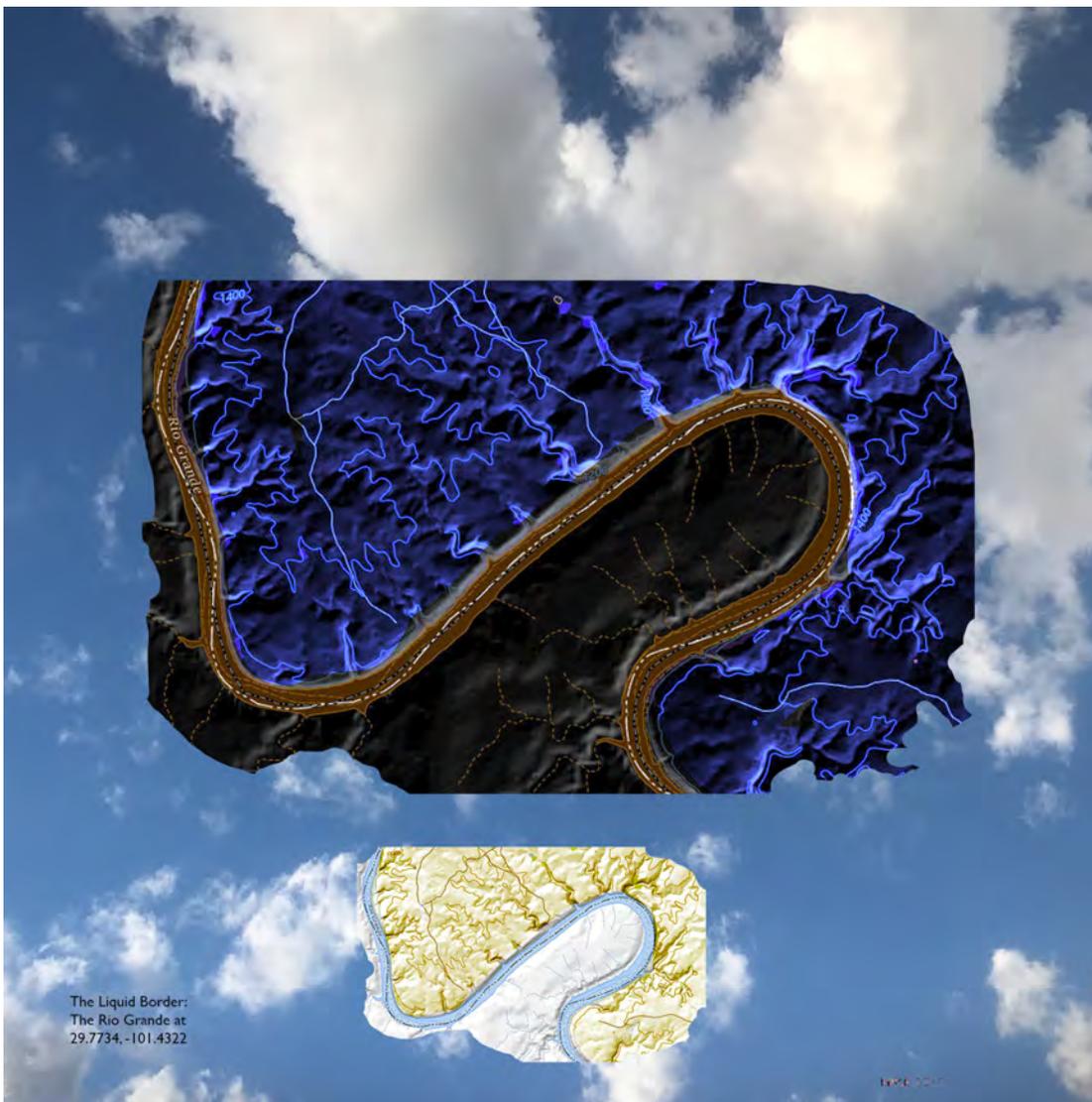
The Blue Arroyo



Jonathan Reeve Price, *The Liquid Border: The Blue Arroyo*, 2019,
Aluminum Print, 24 x 24 inches

*Bloodshot, my eyes
see white on black,
red on blue.
I adjust, and rub
the dusty lids. I put
another pebble under
my tongue, and in the dark,
dizzying my pace,
I trace the guide's shadow
up the irregular cliff.
No moon, no binoculars.
I break off a mesquite branch.
We cross the dirt road,
brushing away our signs.
Single file, we feel our way into
the America we cannot see.*

The Loop



Jonathan Reeve Price, *The Liquid Border: The Loop*, 2019, Aluminum Print, 24 x 24 inches

*The loop electric, the snake that irradiates
the night desert, the baked cliffs, empty
of anyone except those three small figures,
hidden in the black piñons next to the line,
ready to run, gangs at their back, cops ahead,
heads down, into the dark waters they go,
shocked by the strength of this deep heavy flow,
they stagger to keep from being yanked away,
stumble into the slurry hole, clutch
willow branches to climb up the mud slope,
falling, breathless, onto the dangerous,
hot riprap of America.*

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Approaching the River



Jonathan Reeve Price, *The Liquid Border: Approaching the River*, 2019, Aluminum Print, 24 x 24 inches

30.2548, -104.7452

The guide says that the river is right ahead of us.

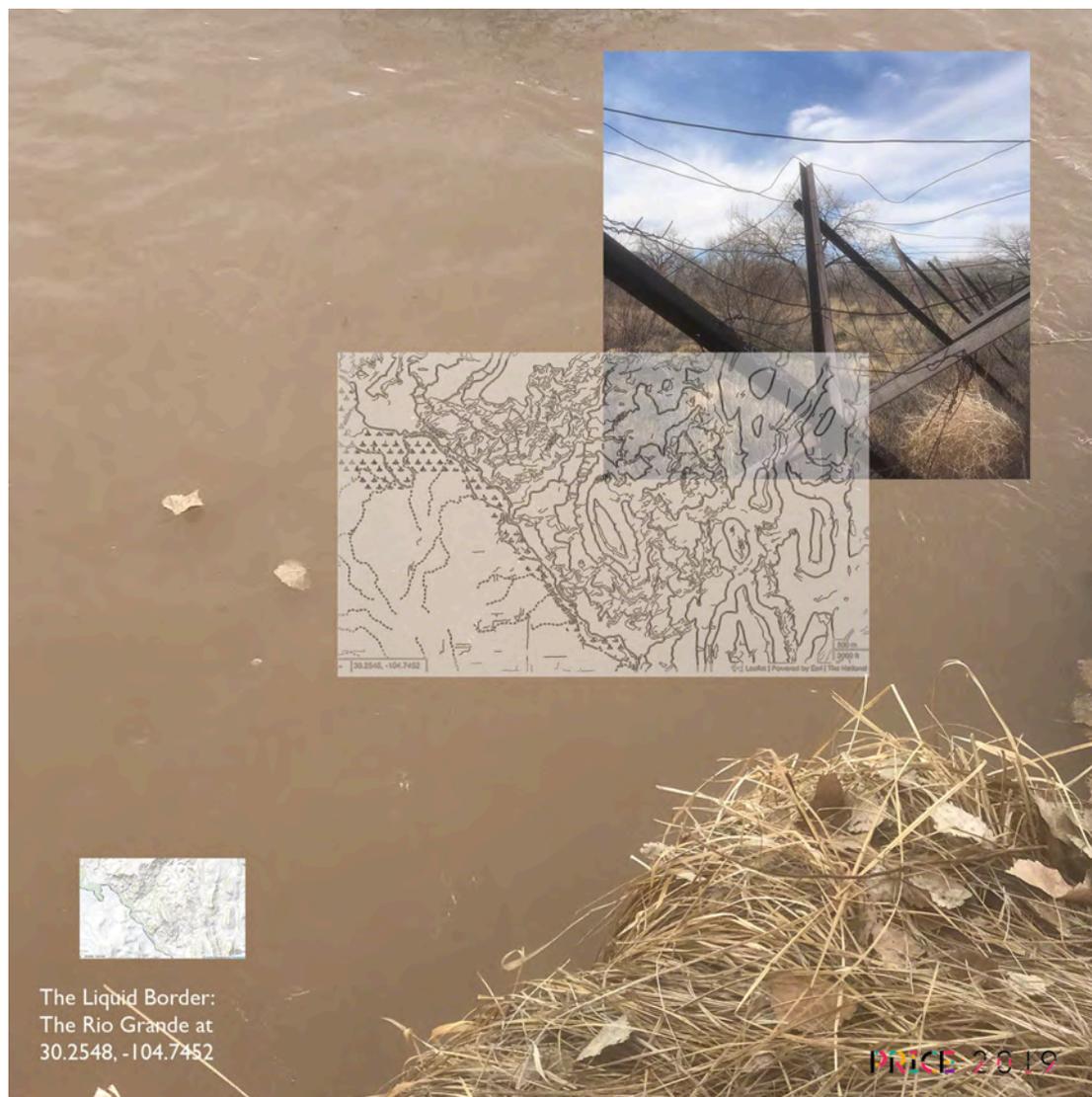
I don't see it.

*I see willows, grass, rocks, thorns,
the path twisting around dead trees,
into the swamp and out.*

*The guide says that once we get across,
the hills will be easy, and the patrols
far off. He says we will get jobs
in Chicago. A day's journey, no more.*

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Tank Traps

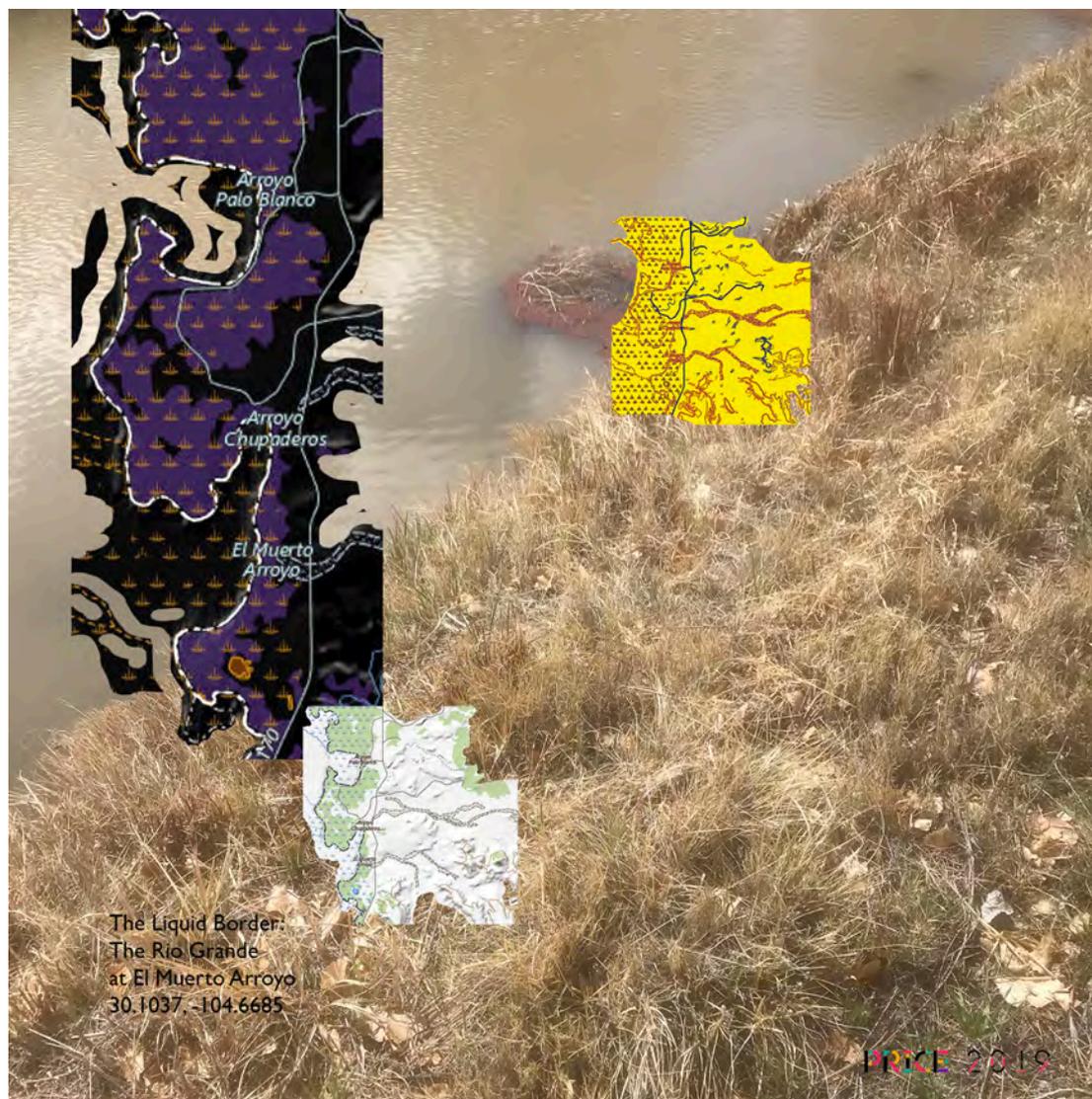


Jonathan Reeve Price, *The Liquid Border: Tank Traps*, 2019, Aluminum Print, 24 x 24 inches

30.2548, -104.7452

*For me, the river is no border.
There is no line down the middle,
like the maps that the Americanos lay out
on our kitchen table, when they come across
for tacos and beer, and a soak in the hot spring.
But when I swim over to explore, I see these,
what one tourist called tank traps.
Do they think that the Mexican army
is going to bring heavy tanks
to get onto the farm road, and
attack the starving cattle up on the mesa?
Where does this fear come from?
A dotted black line on a blue smear.*

El Muerto Arroyo



Jonathan Reeve Price, *The Liquid Border: El Muerto Arroyo*, 2019, Aluminum Print, 24 x 24 inches

30.1037, -104.6685

*Death waits on the far side,
inevitable as sand.*

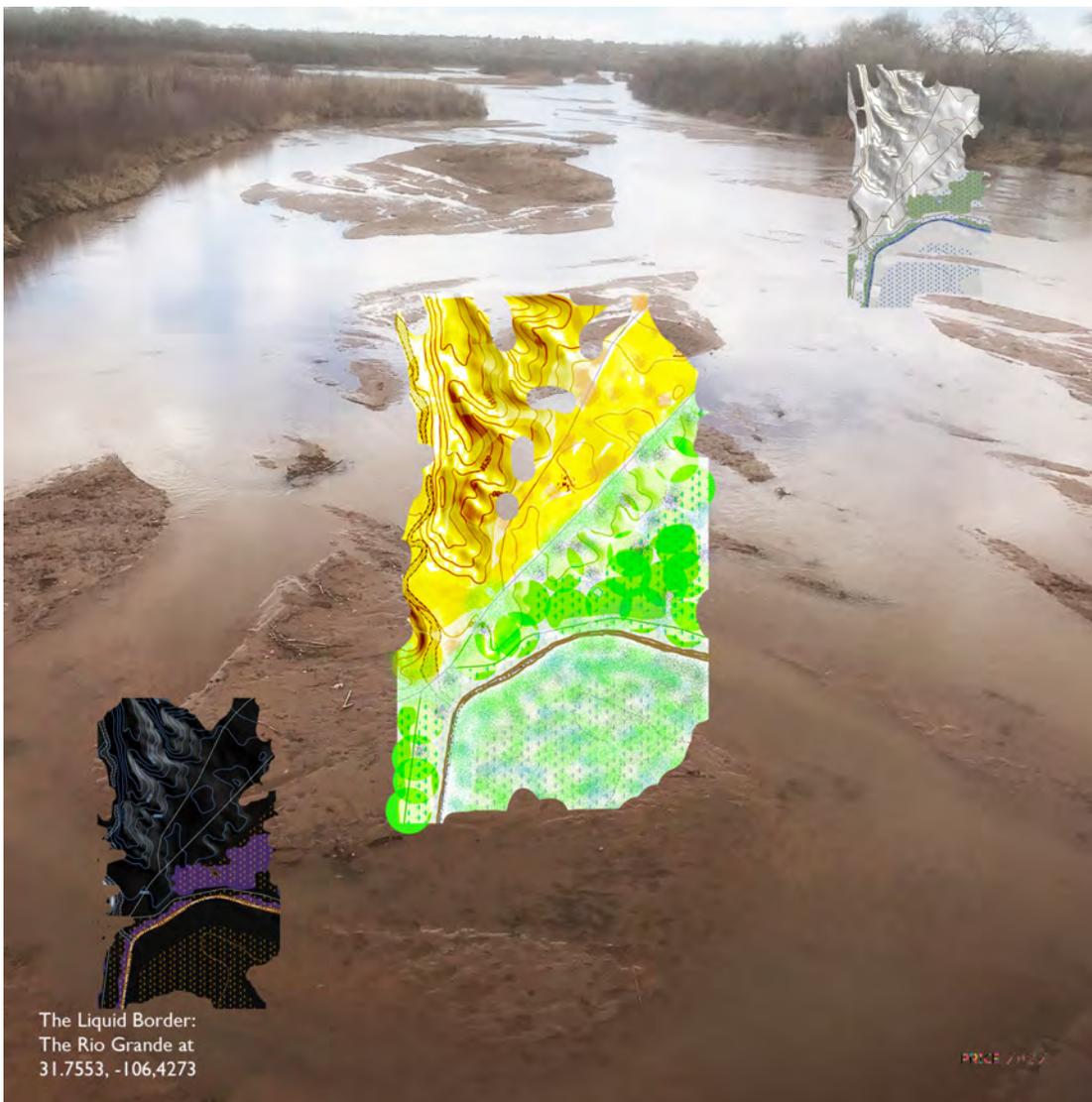
*Beauty has no border,
knows no boundary, nor frame:
Fais ce que voudras.*

*The landscape escapes, the figure
flees the ground, and rhyme dies—
La vida es un sueño.*

*Black and yellow, the corpse
marked the arroyo,
without a name or nation.
Who is the leaf on the grass?*

Jonathan Reeve Price

Dead Reckoning

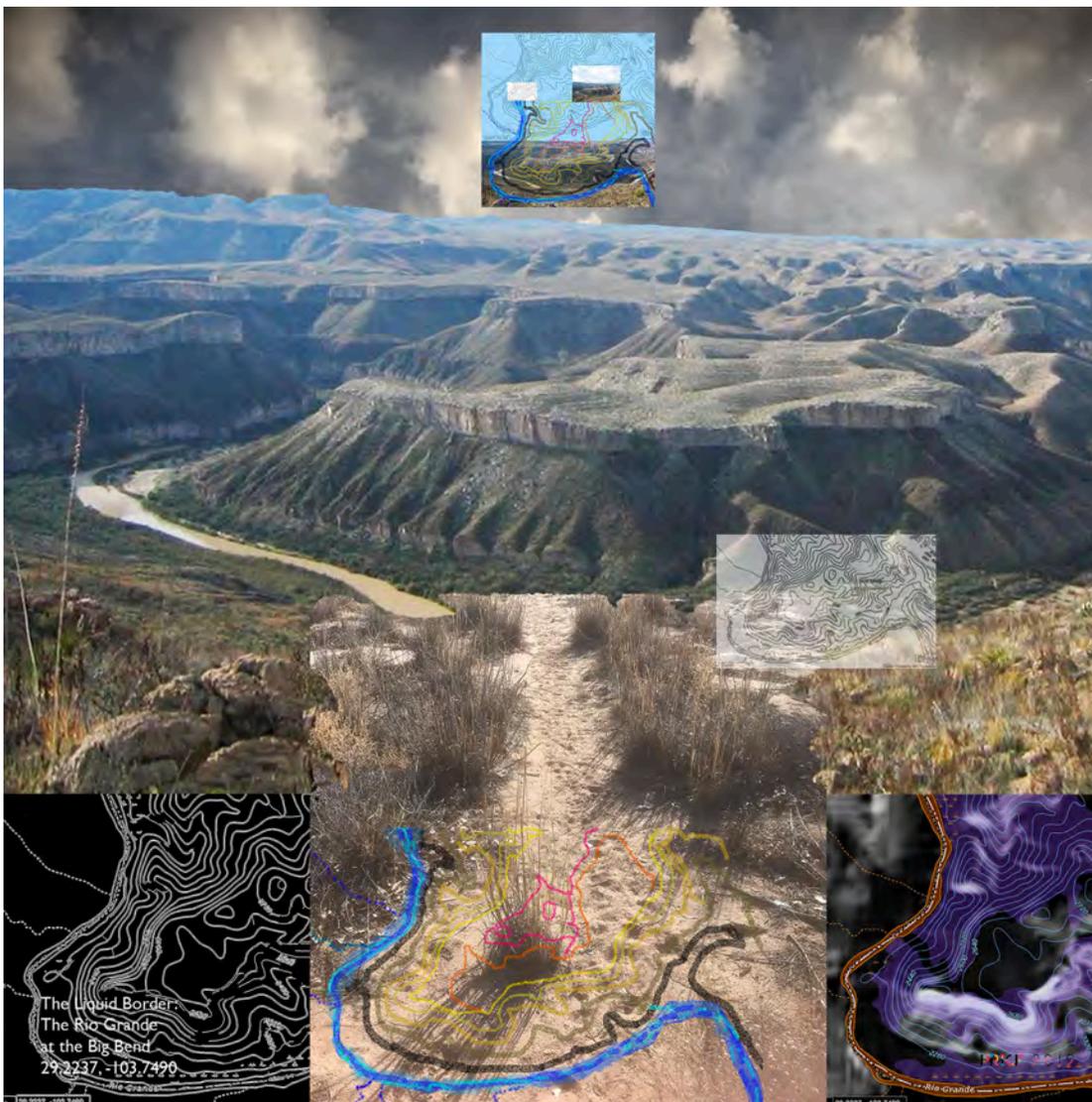


Jonathan Reeve Price, *The Liquid Border: Dead Reckoning*, 2019, Aluminum Print, 24 x 24 inches

*The guide showed me a torn piece of paper.
He called it a map.
He took me up onto a bluff, and, looking
Down at the river, he pointed
To the United States. For him,
The path was clear, the river
As real as the line squiggled from left
To right, under the grey stain.
How many lines he ignored,
The names unknown, the cliffs we would
Climb and fall down, bypass and despair.
None of these fly specks on his sheet
Meant anything. Forward, he said.
And we went into the cold fast water,
Our feet slipping down into sickening mud.
Instinct, we learned, is not enough.*

Jonathan Reeve Price

At the Big Bend



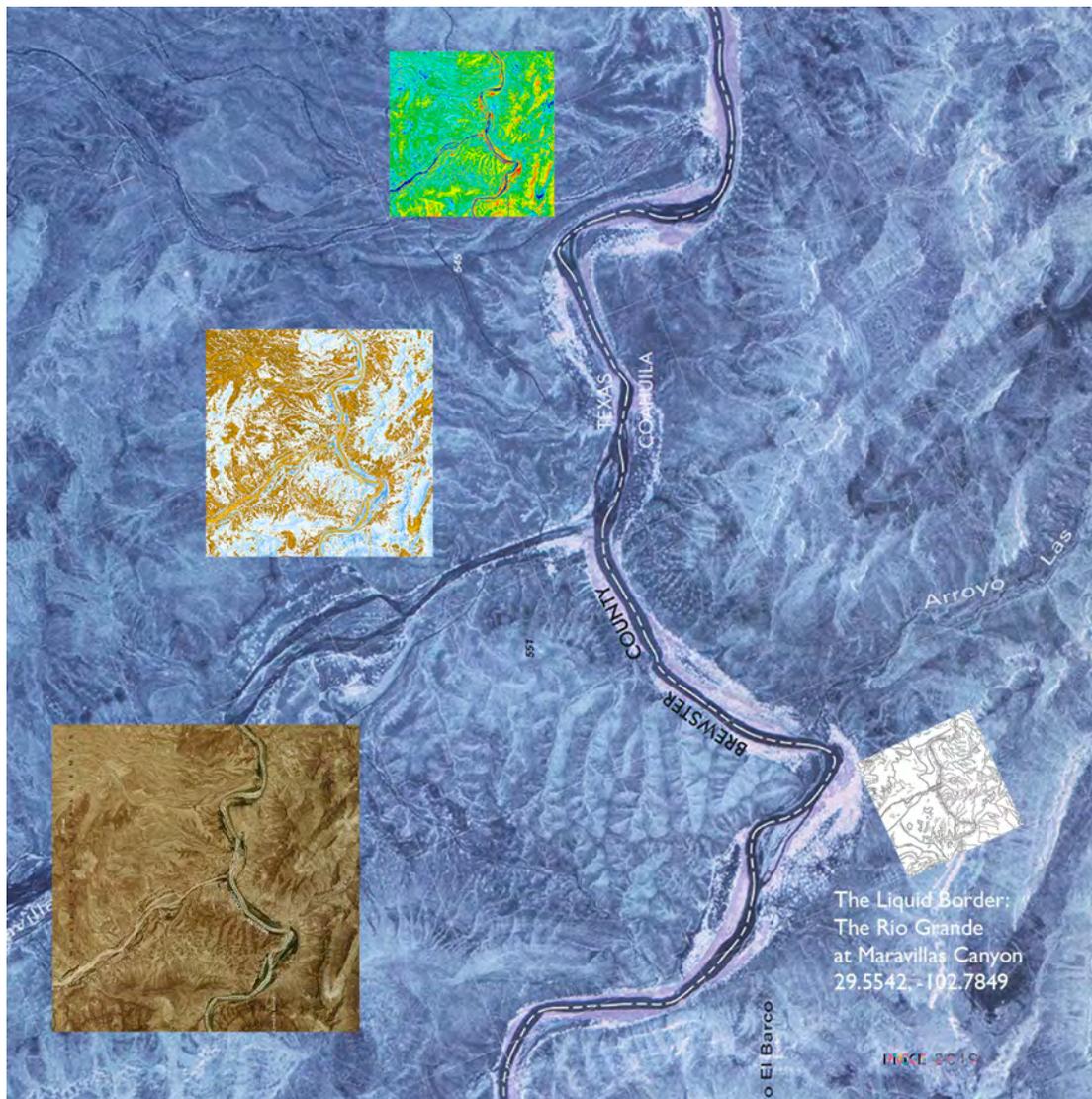
Jonathan Reeve Price, *The Liquid Border: At the Big Bend*, 2019,
Aluminum Print, 24 x 24 inches

29.2237, -103.7490

The Liquid Border

*Wet and cold we crossed the island to the deeper river,
stepped in, and, the guides told us, passed the invisible border,
but all we saw was clouds and those cliffs, so tall,
steep, and slippery, rocks sliding down,
shoving us back down, clambering back up.
How hard our first steps into America were,
how uncertain.
Then heat dried us out.
The spiny cactus tore at our arms.
When we reached the top of the first mesa,
we rested, staring at the endless sharp, dry mounds,
the impossible slopes, and the enormous sky.*

Maravillas



Jonathan Reeve Price, *The Liquid Border: Maravillas*, 2019, Aluminum Print, 24 x 24 inches

Marvels—

*In Coahuila, the flat map shows
ridge trails, fire roads, paths that no one
has walked, left empty by the heat.*

*Sand fills in the edges, but no weed
steps into the middle of the worn track.*

As we pass, our sandals scuff

The small dust on top of hard rock.

*But we dream of water, like the harbor
of Veracruz at dawn, when the small ferries
set out to carry us across, and the sun
slices apart the unsettled tide.*

Nothing is blue here.

But when we see Texas,

we imagine the pools,

just across that dotted line

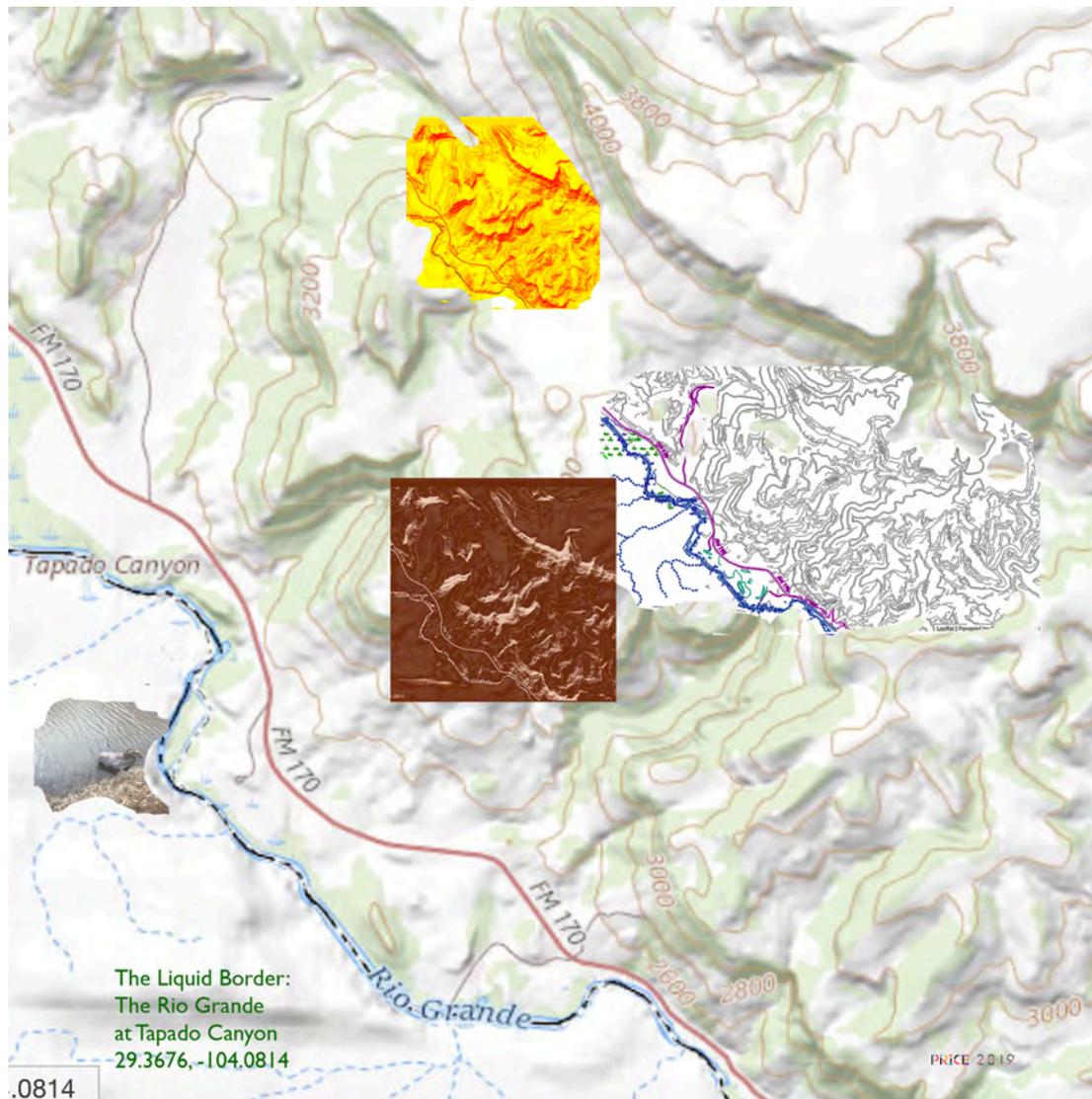
separating us from the county they call Brewster, and

the green gardens that we know

must be growing, just beyond

these tall brown rolls of unfolding dirt.

Tapado Canyon

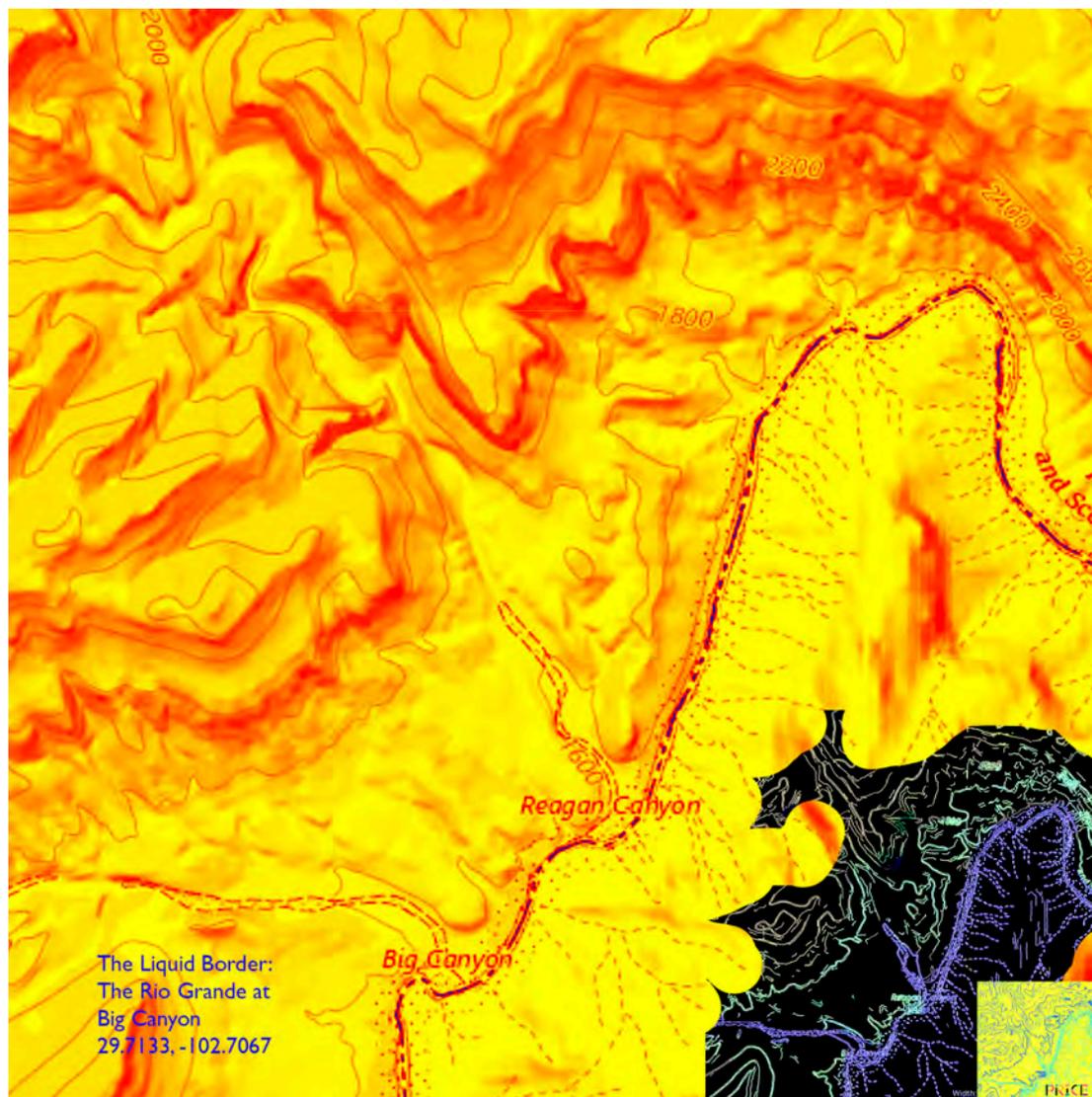


Jonathan Reeve Price, *The Liquid Border: Tapado Canyon*, 2019,
Aluminum Print, 24 x 24 inches

29.3676, -104.0814

*One hundred yards. Willows. Tall grass. Mud.
Our feet sink in. The guide curses us.
The water up to my knees. Cold,
like the ocean at Veracruz,
like the Pepsi I drank on the bus.
I tumble into a deep patch.
Thank God I can swim!
Two men get dragged away.
They do not have breath enough to cry out.
We shake our clothes.
Los estados unidos, muchachos.*

Big Canyon



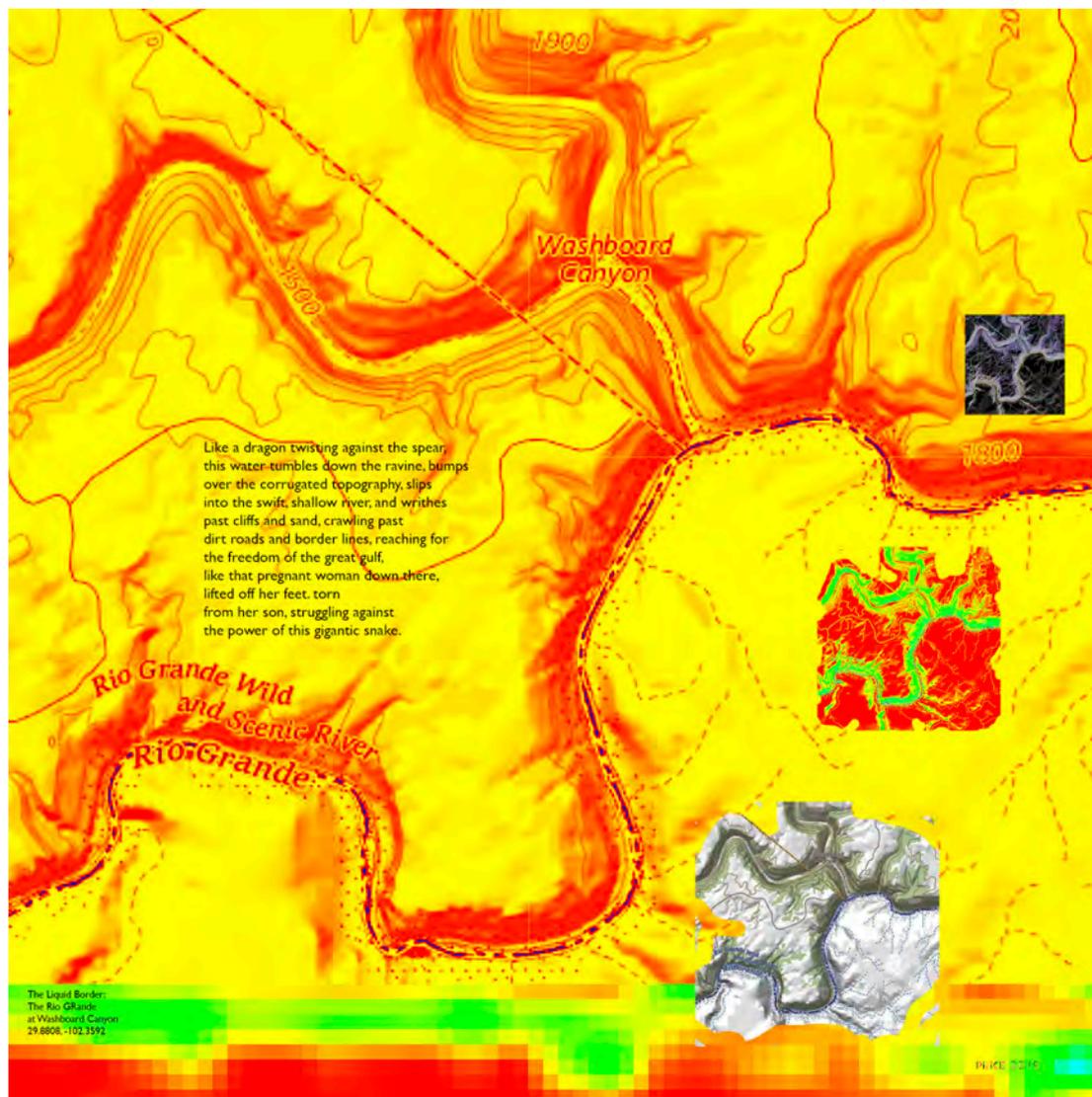
Jonathan Reeve Price, *The Liquid Border: Big Canyon*, 2019, Aluminum Print, 24 x 24 inches

*As we came down into the valley
Each streambed lay bare, the sand
Cut away from the banks, the slash
Of long-ago rain run, storm burst, cutting
Apart the slope, crumbling under
Our stumbling feet. We ran,
At the end, hearing the river in reeds,
Tumbling forward to drink, and drink.*

*At night, the moon made shadows out of
Cliffs, the dark openings, the line after line
Of ridges piling up to the north.*

*But dawn, lighting up the Estados Unidos,
Burnt our skin, slowed our pace up these canyons.
On the second day, lost in the dead lands,
The lucky ones had piss to drink, the weak
Dug holes in the fiery ground to escape
That ferocious sun. Unable to walk, I watched
As the white of Reynaldo's eyes turned
First pink, then red. He could no longer see,
As he babbled, thinking he was drinking water
When he was shoving sand into those cracked lips.
The Migra came too late for him.
For me, air conditioning in a Ford 350, water
From Dasani, the same bottles I used to refill
Back in Veracruz, before being laid off by our president,
Vicente Fox, and his company, Coca Cola.
The speakers banged out a song I knew,
Highway to Hell. Now I could afford to feel the pain
In my sunburned feet, my scalp, my kidneys stinging,
The vision clearing up, the daze cooling,
And grief swimming up, at 80 miles an hour.*

Washboard Canyon

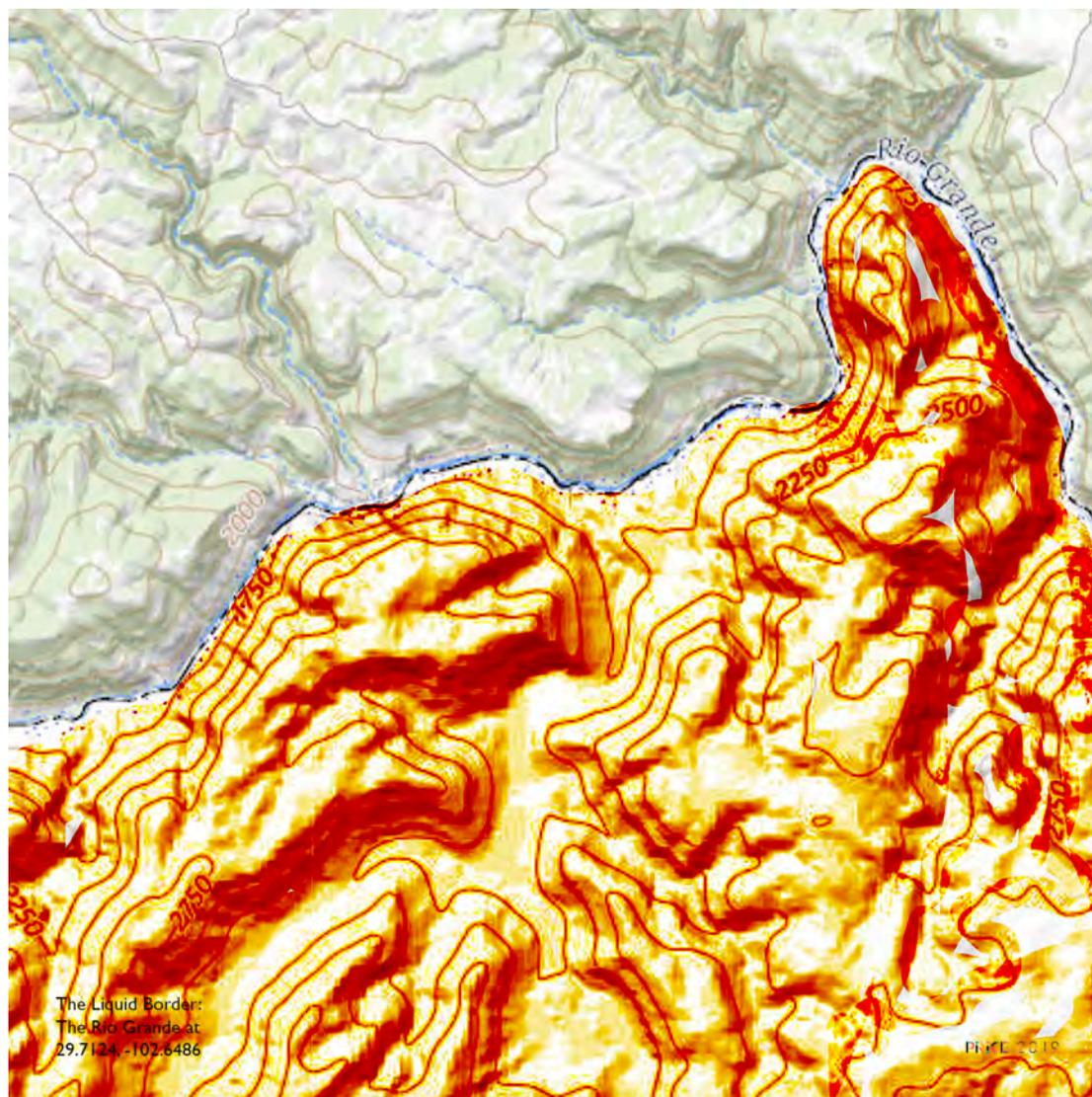


Jonathan Reeve Price, *The Liquid Border: Washboard Canyon*, 2019, Aluminum Print, 24 x 24 inches

*Like a dragon twisting against the spear,
this water tumbles down the ravine, bumps
over the corrugated topography, slips
into the swift, shallow river, and writhes
over cliffs and sand, crawling past
dirt roads and border lines, reaching for
the freedom of the great gulf,
like that pregnant woman down there,
lifted off her feet. torn
from her son, struggling against
the power of this gigantic snake.*

Jonathan Reeve Price

From Both Sides

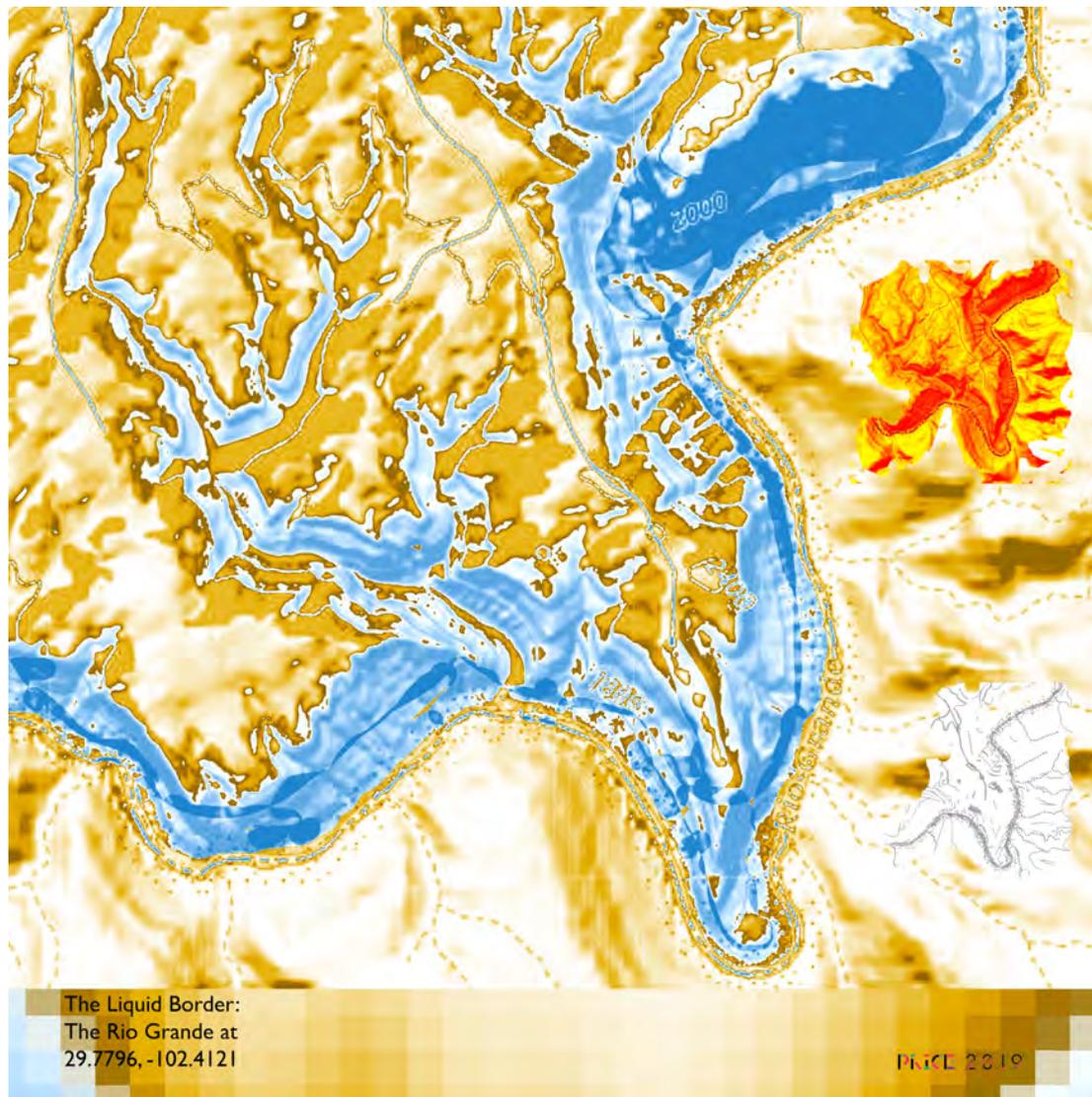


Jonathan Reeve Price, *The Liquid Border: From Both Sides*, 2019,
Aluminum Print, 24 x 24 inches

*From both sides, water runs down,
Over the rim rocks, the trickle passes pinon and jay,
wiggles around loose tumbled boulders,
slips into the slit between
sandstone and schist, following
each irregular contour, snaking past
the last sand bar, into
a slow backwater, until, getting caught,
it is lost in the muddy flow, each drop
invisible within the onrushing weight of
the impetuous, unreasonable, circuitous,
the serpent that finds its way
through desert, cliff, and cleft,
knowing, somehow, how to find
the Gulf of Mexico, and the hot clouds
waiting to suck each drop up into
the moist air, and the accumulating wind.
Who now can say which drop is Mexican,
and which is American? Does the rain know?
Water and wind carved these rocks, made
paths down to meet and mate.
On either side, the terrain can kill;
in the middle, you can drown. Indifferent,
the flow carries away our souls like silt.*

Jonathan Reeve Price

When and Where

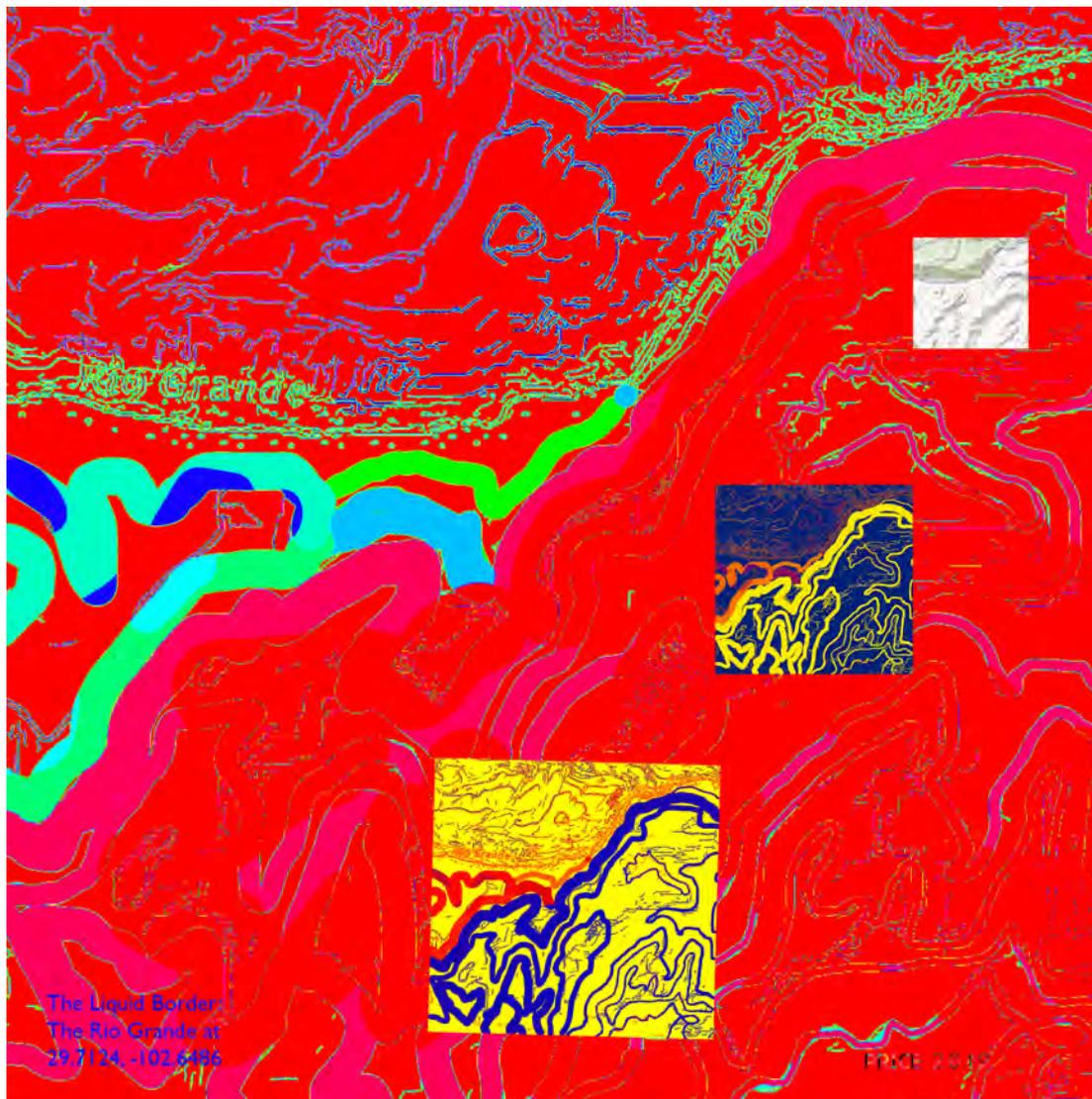


Jonathan Reeve Price, *The Liquid Border: When and Where*, 2019, Aluminum Print, 24 x 24 inches

*I do not know when the others died.
I was dying. I could hardly see.
I fell down by a sharp bush.
I got up and the sand gave way.
Walk, fall, rest, dream.
This valley filled with water.
The flood took me.
The river carried me down to the sea.
On the big beach, Mamma came to me.
I was young then. She told me of the Virgin.
I gave myself up to Her.
When I began to wake, I heard metal clank,
Far-off voices. Something moved part of me,
Perhaps my arm. I could not speak. My tongue
Hard like a bone. Motionless, I realized
I am no longer frying like a bug.
There must be people here.
When I could open one eye, I saw tubes,
Machines, overhead lights, a window.
In the interview, I could not say
What day, or where, the others fell away.
When I could drink from a glass,
The border patrol showed me a map,
Asking where I'd been.
I could only laugh, and point to the Gulf.*

Jonathan Reeve Price

Mexican Mountains



Jonathan Reeve Price, *The Liquid Border: Mexican Mountains*, 2019, Aluminum Print, 24 x 24 inches

*Hand me the tequila. I think
Rivers should be blue, mountains
purple, green, or grey.*

*Balancing midstream, you hand me
the Patron, and I very carefully
hand over Jack.
Waist deep, drunk, and happy
we guzzle again, stagger, and pee.*

*What government can stop us now?
What law or hypocrite? How far
away, these vicious pious S.O.B.s!
We can cuss in Spanglish, and hiss
without a word, our eyes knowing,
we are kin, we are labor,
we have no degree, just hands
hard as the tar we pour, up on the hot roof.*

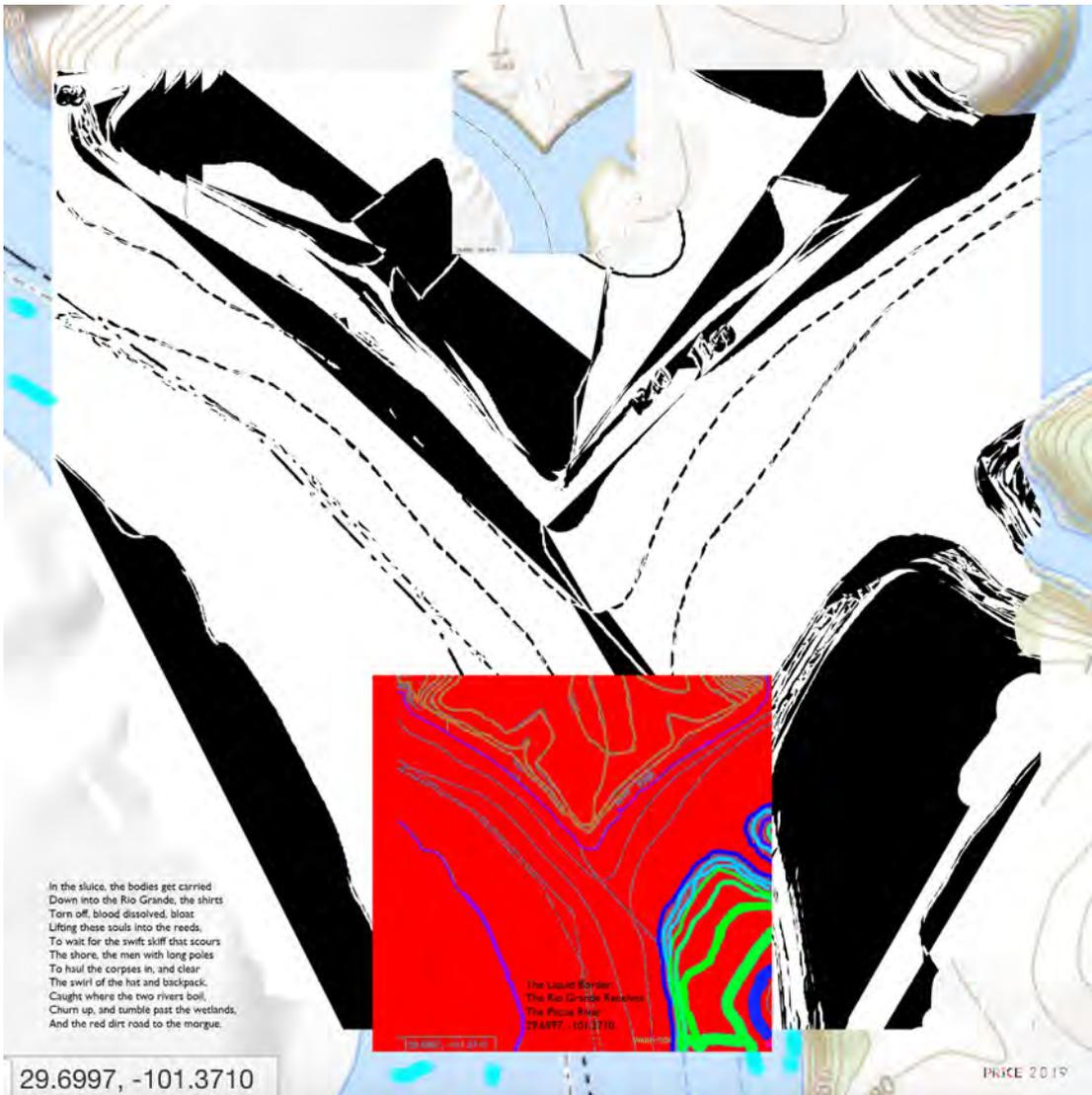
*The radio plays mariachi, as we pound
nails into beams, pour stucco,
climb the raggedy scaffolding to fix
the gutter, rotted by wind and rain.
How can we repair this line,
so hard to see, inside the mud, the current
taking our feet away, tipping us, laughing,
into the cold rush? We land on sand,
and stand up. Who here cares what presidents
and cops and priests have said? The air here
dries off these bottles we've held onto,
and we toast ourselves, telling off the law,
consigning the self-righteous to shit.*

*Blood on both sides, breath and body
being one, land not knowing what or why
these rich grifters have grabbed our ass.
Lying back in the full sun, soaked,
we know our papers are sticking together,
in our thin wallets, in our torn back pockets.*

*When we finish off our mixed drinks, doubly gone,
compadres burning the last drops, we send
our empties bobbling down the river, around the snag
and broken branches, without a note.*

Jonathan Reeve Price

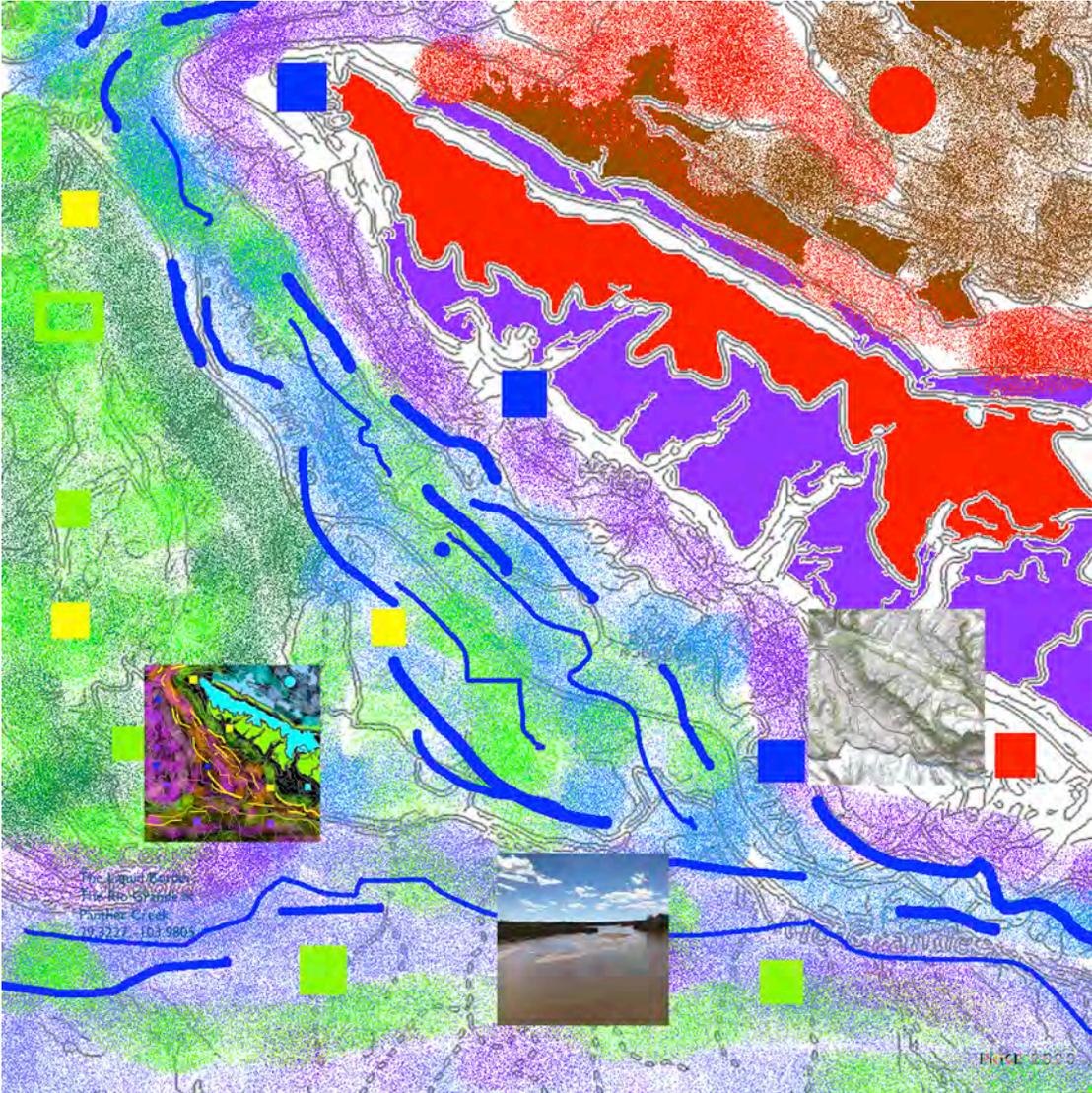
The Rio Grande Receives the Pecos River



Jonathan Reeve Price, *The Liquid Border: The Rio Grande Receives the Pecos River* 2019, Aluminum Print, 24 x 24 inches

*In the sluice, the bodies get carried
Down into the Rio Grande, the shirts
Torn off, blood dissolved, bloat
Lifting these souls into the reeds,
To wait for the swift skiff that scours
The shore, the men with long poles
To haul the corpses in, and clear
The swirl of the hat and backpack,
Caught where the two rivers boil,
Churn up, and tumble past the wetlands,
And the red-dirt road to the morgue.*

Panther Creek



Jonathan Reeve Price, *The Liquid Border: Panther Creek*, 2019, Aluminum Print, 24 x 24 inches

*Impossibly bright, the map fractures, as
rivulets and dry streams make jagged
tracks, levels speak of steep irregular
cliffs, square pixels burrow into the slope,
water loses color, and hills
become stacks of cutouts.
How far from earth our retina withdraws,
imagining a valley as outline,
each contour distinct, unplowed,
wind carved, rain cracked.
The earth is our excuse,
artifice the spectacle, and
empathy a distant land.*

Jonathan Reeve Price

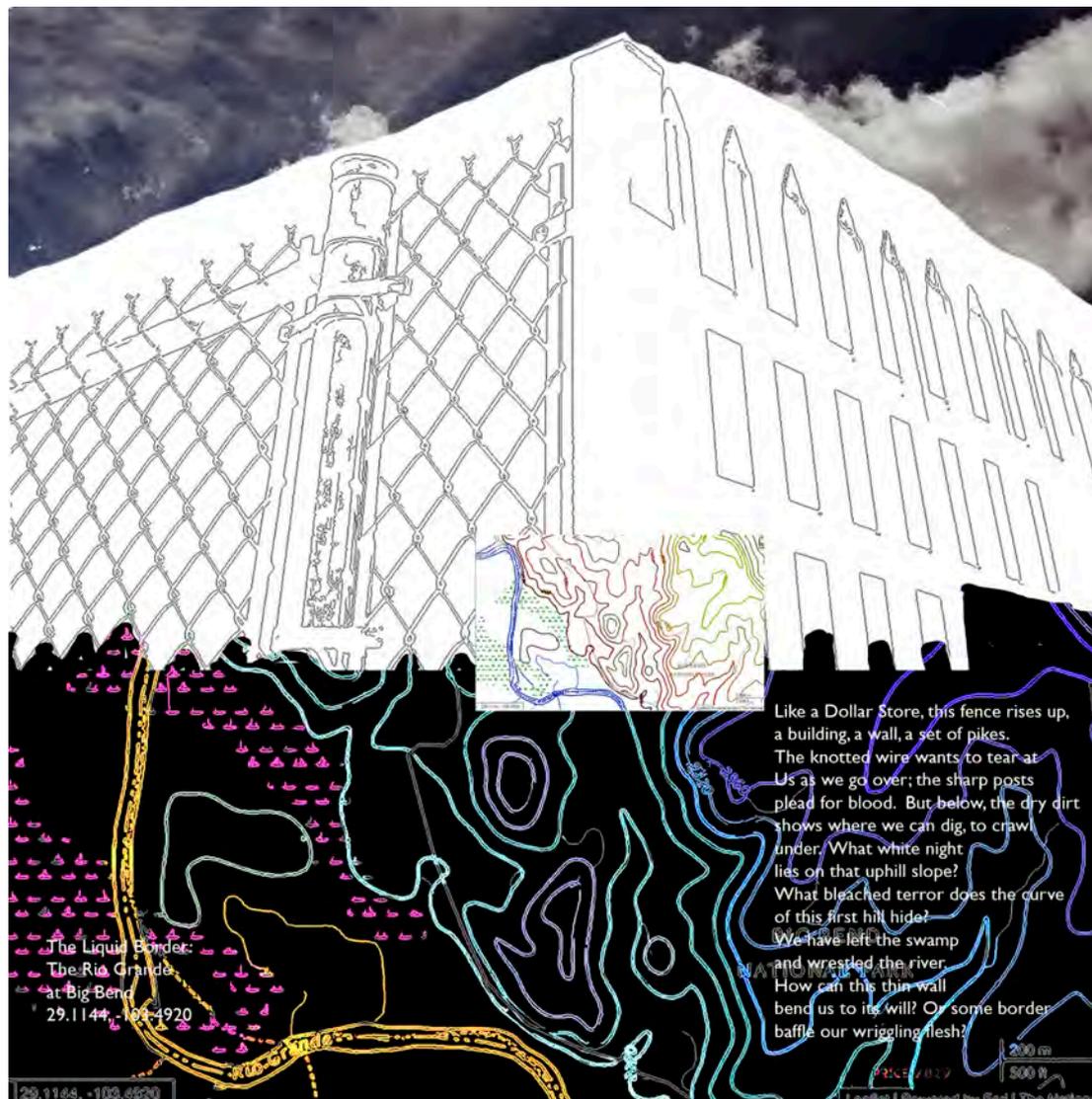
Cerro de las Burras



Jonathan Reeve Price, *The Liquid Border: Cerro de las Burras*, 2019, Aluminum Print, 24 x 24 inches

*The heat makes my head swirl,
The slope turns black and white,
This soapbush has gone brown. I go on,
peeling off the shirt that tears at my skin,
trapped by the twenty-foot drop, the meandering
everlasting rio. I go on
tracking the rim, seeing the sudden drop.
Me and the mesquite, we hug the brim.
This brown snake pulls back, letting me
go on, bloodshot, following another curve
another glimpse of this bleached ravine.*

Night Fence



Jonathan Reeve Price, *The Liquid Border: Night Fence*, 2019,
Aluminum Print, 24 x 24 inches

*Like a Dollar Store, this fence rises up,
a building, a wall, a set of pikes.
The knotted wire wants to tear at
Us if we go over; the sharp posts
plead for blood. But below, the dry dirt
shows where we can dig, to crawl
under. What white night
lies on that uphill slope?
What bleached terror does the curve
of this first hill hide?
We have left the swamp
and wrestled the river.
How can this thin wall
bend us to its will? Or some border
baffle our wriggling flesh?*

Jonathan Reeve Price

The Cages at McAllen, Texas



Jonathan Reeve Price, *The Liquid Border: The Cages at McAllen, Texas*, 2019, Aluminum Print, 24 x 24 inches

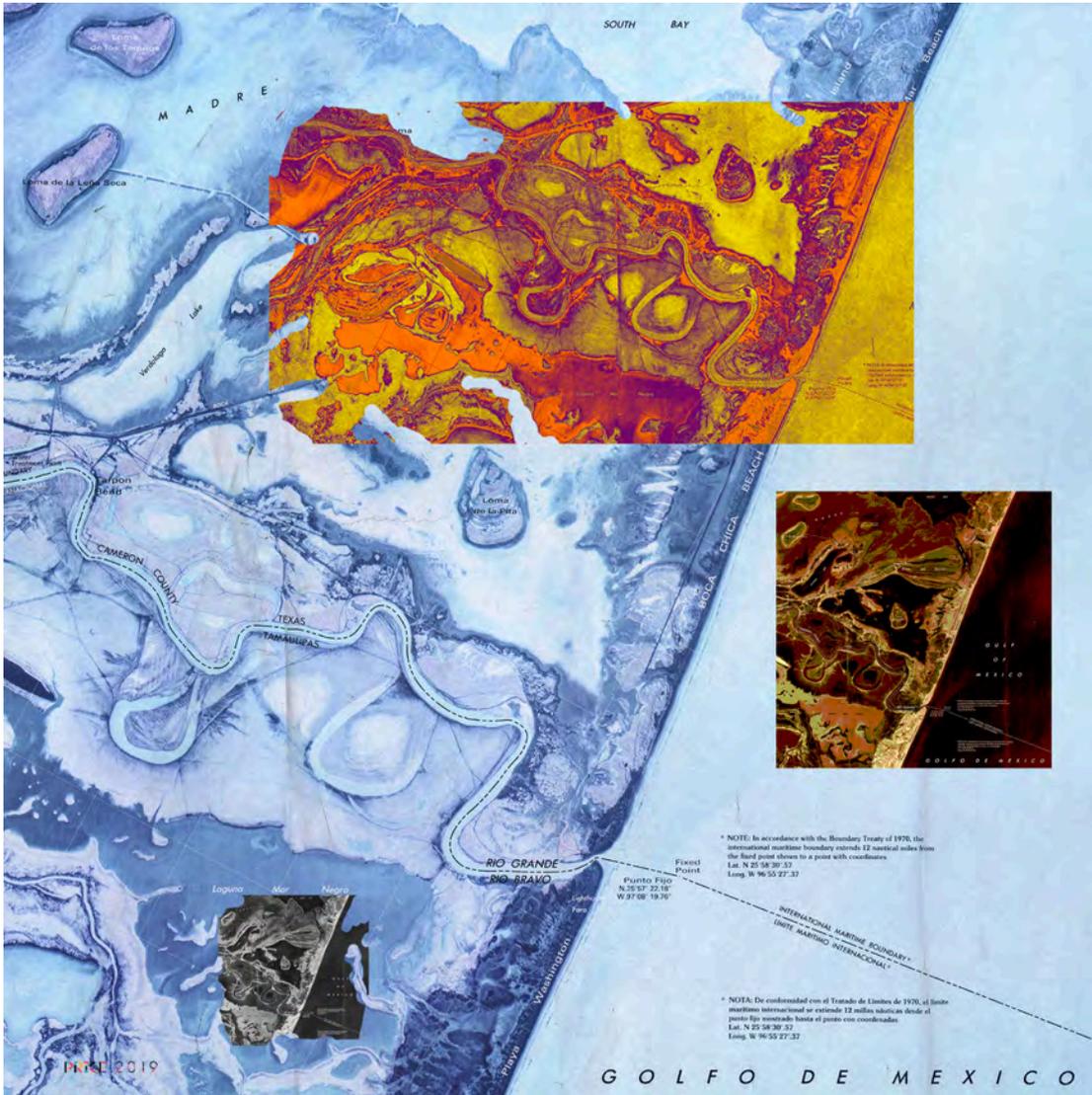
*The lawyer says they will find you,
sometime, "muy pronto."*

*At night, scrunching my Mylar blanket to my chest,
I pull my knees up against the cold wall, speaking
Silently to you, sending you love,
wherever you are, kissing your head, reminding you
of your lamb, and your Grandma, and your crib.*

*The smell wakes me, the shifting legs, the groping
fingers that find my thigh. I kick and gouge,
but the migra bring in more men, and bologna sandwiches.
In the dark, I can feel your fear, far off.
I hear your crying, despite the snoring around me,
the sick woman farting, the men shitting themselves
on the open drain. Oh Eduardo,
why did I ever trust America?*

Jonathan Reeve Price

Mouth of the Rio Grande



Jonathan Reeve Price, *The Liquid Border: Mouth of the Rio Grande*, 2019, Aluminum Print, 24 x 24 inches

25.5722, -97.0919

*Until a hurricane comes in, the river
cannot reach the Gulf.*

*We can't irrigate
sorghum, corn, or wheat.*

*Until the Rio Conchos floods, upstream,
and pours good Mexican water in,
the border is sand.*

*Waiting for rain, the fish
gather in these shallow pools.*

*So close to the open sea,
the tiny stream shrivels and stinks.*

*And here at the beach,
weeds, hyacinth, and brush
take root, making the sand dune
impenetrable, a solid dam.*

Formally Speaking

Some folks ask me what formal qualities I am interested in. Here are a few issues I debate as I create the images and texts.

Depth vs flatness

How far in can we go? How far back should we pull, before losing sight of the territory? Software lets us create on multiple levels, making some transparent, others opaque, some rising up from underneath, others blocking our view of what lies below. Where do we stand?

In 18th century landscapes, we stand with the artist below the waterfall, looking up at the peaks beyond. But when we look at the way images build up on the computer screen, we are rarely sure where to plant our feet. As in some of Laura Owens' gigantic canvases, we are, one moment, on top, the next moment, behind, below, or beside. For me, this uncertainty, the sheer indeterminacy of our position, is part of the pleasure.

Clarity vs disintegration

I like to see the pixels I am working with. Like a modernist, I enjoy showing, not hiding, the media I work in. Instead of smoothing over the pixellation that occurs when I enlarge the image, I emphasize the effect, as if to say, Look, this is what lies below the surface. Fuzzy? Yes. But, for a techie sensibility, clear.

Frozen vs moving

The printed image stays put. But I hope that the eye is encouraged to follow my lead, to move in and out, to make comparisons, essentially, to do what Rudolf Arnheim calls "visual thinking." For me, composition just means acting as a sherpa for the eye, indicating where the best paths are, encouraging exploration.

Utility vs uselessness

As I destroy the usefulness of the original map as a guide to the territory, the image loses most of its value as an aid to navigation, a context for understanding one's place in space, or a pinpoint for history. These values remain palely loitering in the background, like ghosts of soldiers killed on a battlefield so long ago; we only hear them calling out when the wind moves across the tall grass. Horace was wrong: art may be sweet, but when it verges on the useful, it becomes documentation.

Truth vs imagination

We grant truth to a “real” map. We think, this must represent the way the road curves here, or the two highways come together over there. We grant this accolade of accuracy to official maps, ones with a high density of data, such as Google Maps. We believe the story that Google’s camera-cars have really toured every road, even every alley, so that Mrs. Google can steer us correctly, even when we encounter a round-about in the middle of a French forest.

My work bears no such verisimilitude. You cannot rely on my imaginary map for turn-by-turn guidance as you drive. I am just imagining this graphic world. Like Italo Calvino, with his invisible cities, I see imaginary routes, communes, rivers. Like Jean d’Ormesson’s mock-historical novel *The Glory of the Empire*, I document something close to reality, but not all there.

Empathy vs esthetic distance

Imagination lets us sense what these people, down on the ground, might be feeling as they trudge through desert to reach the Rio Grande, and how it feels to wade across, against a fast, strong current, then climb out and start across the Texas desert. To me, the USGS maps and the NASA photographs offer technological insight, but what a contrast with the human suffering hidden inside those pixels! Text may suggest the experience, and transformation of the raw data into colors, shapes, and alternate content—these visual distortions may also hint at what the migrants are going through. No word or image can reproduce or represent the subjective experience of these folks. Art does provide distance...allowing us, in safety, to imagine what it must be like. Too much distance, and we get data. Too little, and emotions overcome us. Somewhere in between, in the interplay between text and image, I hope that we may, briefly, sense their spirit.

Image vs text

As I explore the original map, I use software to experiment, revise, improve, destroy the original image. In my play, I am trying to get a sense of the underlying landscape, what slopes, cliffs, ravines it may present to the people passing through. Having lived next to the Rio Grande for almost half my life, I try to gauge what it is doing at this location, how fast it is going, how deep, how clouded with red mud or green runoff. How would I feel swimming, wading, pushing through this heavy mass of unstoppable water?

To me, text emerges as a voice for my stand-in, the imagined life of the person encountering this obstacle on the way. These poems talk about what we can see in the image, and suggest what we cannot quite see, but might be able to imagine.

These image-texts carry content that bounces back and forth between the visual and the verbal, between the technical and the emotional, between fact and fiction. Neither medium exists on its own. For me, the life is in the interplay.

About Jonathan Reeve Price

What are some of your solo shows?

Acequia, Los Ranchos Town Hall, Los Ranchos, NM.

Alphabet in the Spectrum of the Rainbow, West Broadway Gallery, NY.

Balloon Poems, Cooper Union, New York, NY.

Canvas Photos, Verle II Gallery, Hartford, CT.

Edible I Ching, Soho Gallery, New York, NY.

Flophouse Follies, with Joel Katz. Hopkins Center, Dartmouth College, Hanover, NH.

I Ching on the West Side Highway, 18th to 23rd Streets, New York, NY, West Broadway Gallery, New York, NY.

Liquid Border, Gallery with a Cause, Albuquerque, NM.

Paste Ups, West Broadway Gallery, New York, NY.

Rio Grande: Wetlands/Borderlands, Open Space Center, Albuquerque, NM.

Where have you been in group shows?

311 Gallery, Raleigh, NC.

Art League Rhode Island, Providence, RI.

Avant-Garde Festival, New York, NY.

Boston Visual Artists' Union, Boston, Massachusetts.

Brooklyn Museum, Brooklyn, NY.

Cade Art Gallery, Anne Arundel Community College, Arnold, MD

Farmington Museum, Farmington, NM.

Fort Works Art, Fort Worth, TX.

Grey Art Gallery, New York University, NY.

Henry Hicks Gallery, Brooklyn, New York.

Kensington Arts Association, Toronto, Ontario, Canada

Librije Beeldende Kunst, Utrecht, Holland.

Loeb Student Center, New York University, New York, NY.

Mississippi State University Art Gallery, MS.

Museum of Parc Mont Royal, Montreal, Quebec, Canada.

New Mexico Art League, Albuquerque, NM.

Pleiades Gallery, New York, NY.

Richmond Museum, Norfolk, VA.

Sangre de Cristo Arts Center, Pueblo, CO.

Site: Brooklyn, Brooklyn, NY.

Center of the Arts, Tubac, AZ.

West Broadway Gallery, New York, NY.

Whitney Counterweight,. Soho, NY.

Women's Caucus of Colorado, Lakewood, CO.

Any museums?

Seventeen pieces from this set have been taken for the permanent collections of the Albuquerque Museum, and the Rumsey Map Collection of Stanford University. Other works have appeared in group shows at the Jewish Museum, and the Brooklyn Museum, in New York.

Who's reviewed your work?

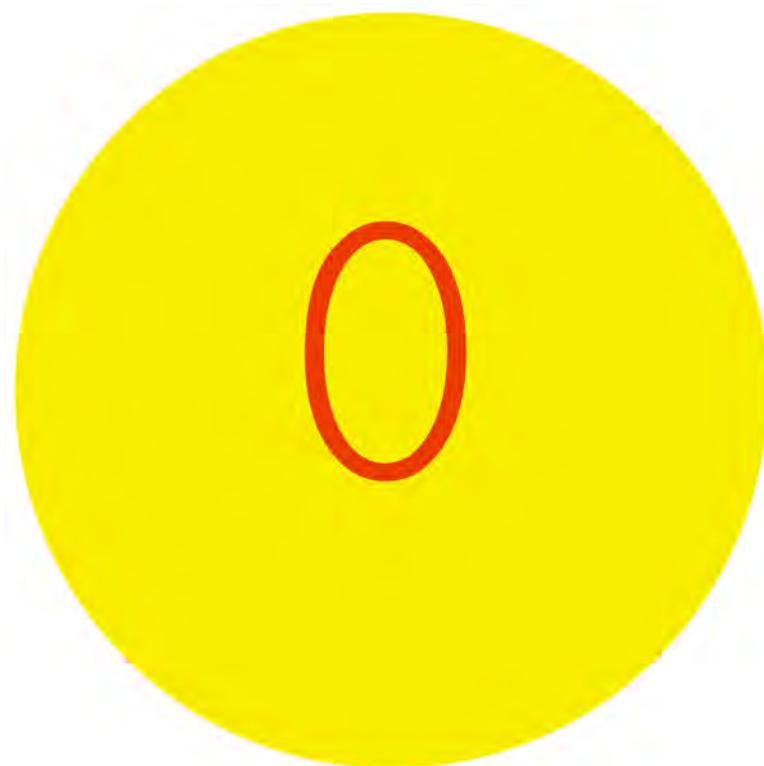
American Artist
Art News
Artists Review Art
Arts Magazine
Christian Science Monitor
New York Magazine
New York Times
Soho Weekly News
The Nation
Village Voice
Women Artists' Newsletter

What are some books you've written?

American Scenery: Thomas Cole vs NASA, Communication Circle.
Remapping Paris, A MuseumZero Exhibition, Communication Circle.
Write a Use Case: Gathering Requirements that Users can Understand, Communication Circle.
Get Past the Tags: How to Write (and Read) XML, Communication Circle.
Digital Imaging: The Official HP Guide, with Lisa Price, from IDG Books.
Hot Text—Web Writing that Works! With Lisa Price, New Riders/Peachpit Pearson.
The Virtual Playhouse for the Macintosh, Hayden Books.
Video Visions: A Medium Discovers Itself. New American Library.
Classic Scenes. New American Library.
The Best Thing on TV: Commercials. Viking Press, Penguin Books.
Life Show: How to See Theater in Life and Life in Theater, with John Lahr. Viking Press and Penguin Books.

Where can we go to learn more about you?

Blog: <http://museumzero.blogspot.com/>
Linked In: <http://www.linkedin.com/in/JonathanReevePrice>
Amazon Author Page: <https://www.amazon.com/author/jonathanprice>
Web site: MuseumZero.Art



Museum Zero is a virtual museum, living mostly on the Internet.

<http://museumzero.blogspot.com/>

<http://museumzero.art>

Critical Comments

Price's new poetry collection centers on the nature of borders.

How do you cut a river in half? You can't, of course—which makes the paradox of the Rio Grande even more painful in Price's thoughtful, poignant new book of poetry and digital art. The poet refers to that river, which makes up much of the physical border between the United States and its southern neighbor: "Throughout most of the river's run to the Gulf of Mexico," Price writes, "the border is in the middle of the flow, invisible, but real." That border has become a source of significant international conflict in the modern era, as immigrants hoping to cross it have run up against the will—and in a few places, the wall—of a presidential administration intent on keeping them out. Price's volume seeks to map that liminal space in imagery and verse. Roughly half the book is given over to digital images; in them, the artist stitches together cartographs, photographs, and satellite images, many of them altered, to evoke the strange space between the two countries. Price calls these pieces "imaginary" maps and argues that they document "something close to reality, but not all there." Accompanying the visuals are roughly a dozen thoughtful, poignant poems, many of which capture the torturous experience of those seeking entry into America.

Price is as adept with his poetry as he is with his pictures, and the combination is a moving testimony to the struggle of those who yearn for a better life elsewhere.

A mournful, beautiful, and original synthesis of word and image.

—Kirkus Reviews

I have visited Border Patrol stations in Del Rio, McAllen and El Paso and watched the BP agents conduct their methodical searches for stray migrants to snare. Jonathan's use of poetry, photography and prose touched my senses deeply. I felt the sights, sounds, and smells of river crossings by desperate humans. It will be a book to read over and over again for many years to come.

—T. Zane Reeves

Great pictures! Most of the people that grow up living by the Rio Grande know all this, but it takes courage to present it to the people, so everyone knows how easy/hard could it be, thanks!

—Miguel Angel Pina