



# Tom Kiefer

*"I wanted to photograph America"*

[tomkiefer.com](http://tomkiefer.com)

**BORN**  
Wichita, Kansas

**LIVES AND WORKS**  
Ajo, Arizona

## ABOUT THE ARTIST

Born in Wichita and raised in the Seattle area, Tom Kiefer lived and worked in Los Angeles in graphic design and advertising for 20 years before moving to Ajo, Arizona. Drawn to the region's stark beauty, Kiefer sought to further his development as an artist and set out to photograph the American landscape- its rugged terrain, cityscapes, rural vistas and cultural markers. His first project in Ajo, "Journey West" chronicled the local landscape and infrastructure of Ajo and the surrounding areas of Tucson and Phoenix.

"Because art rarely pays for itself," Tom jokes, he ended up taking a job as a janitor for the local Border Patrol center in Why, Arizona in 2003. There he, collected tens of thousands of items confiscated from migrants by Border Patrol agents, items deemed unsafe or non-essential. Toothbrushes. Combs. Bibles. House keys. Children's toys. He started out donating these items, but as he increasingly came across sentimental personal belongings, he was uncomfortable. He began photographing these items in 2007, resulting in the series, *El Sueño Americano* (*The American Dream*).



## CURRENT EXHIBIT: *EI SUEÑO AMERICANO: THE AMERICAN DREAM*

*El Sueño Americano* documents an entirely different kind of American landscape than *Journey West*, one marked by the material traces of lives in peril, identities in flux, and dreams uncertain.

Kiefer's eye for commercial photography is at work in the *El Sueño* photos. Objects divorced from their context take on qualities of a pop art still life. Cotton-candy-colored combs are arranged in a grid-like format, against a bubble gum-pink background. Tidy arrangements of used soaps recall the pastel hues of after dinner mints. Stacks of tuna cans recall Warhol's Campbell's soup cans. The formal qualities of the photos--the fastidious arrangements, the harmonious and often striking color combinations--communicate both an extraordinary measure of care, on the part of the artist. At the same time, the systematic documentation and aerial perspective and dead-on shots with objects in the center convey a matter-of-factness about these objects, loaded with personal sentiment and political implications. For Kiefer, these objects are primarily human stories.

These photos raise basic questions like:

- Whose things are these?**
- Why so many?**
- Where are their owners now?**
- Why were they collected?**

In their poetic presentations, Kiefer's photos elevate the human stories told by these objects.

Since being released in August 2015, *El Sueño Americano* has received recognition from *LensCulture* (Top 50 Emerging Photographers) and *Photolucida's* Critical Mass top 50.

This series of photographic works documenting objects confiscated at the US/Mexico border, have recently garnered national acclaim including reviews in *The New York Times*, *Wired*, *Huffington Post*, *The American*, *The New Yorker*, and *Lens Culture*.

**View more of Tom Kiefer's work here**  
[www.tomkiefer.com](http://www.tomkiefer.com)  
[@tomkiefer.photographer](https://www.instagram.com/tomkiefer.photographer)





**BEFORE VIEWING**

Do you think artists have a social responsibility (i.e, a responsibility to address certain issues, consider certain audiences?)

When is archiving, or gathering and presenting information, objective? When is it non-objective? Is it possible to present an objective archive? If so, what are some examples, perhaps non-art related?

Think of an example where art (visual art, music, dance, theater) provided a glimpse into the lives of people who would otherwise remain unseen, their stories untold. Describe that work. What insight did it provide or questions did it raise?

**WHILE VIEWING**

How would you describe Kiefer's work to someone who has never seen it?  
How are these images similar from product advertisements?  
How are they similar?

How do those differences and similarities influence how we understand the works, how perhaps Kiefer intended us to view these objects?

What clues do the objects tell us about who these objects might have belonged to, what they care about?

Tom Kiefer has chosen, from tens of thousands of objects to document and exhibit these items? Why these?

If you were to create a filing system for the objects you see in the photos, what might some of the categories be?



**KEY IDEAS**

- Archive
- Artifact
- Document
- Immigration
- Pop Art
- Photography

**AFTER VIEWING**

Many people believe that art should speak for itself. In other words, we shouldn't need any information besides what we see to understand the work. This theory called Formalism, maintains that we understand what a work is about by how examining how it is made- it's formal qualities of materials, color, shape, arrangement, etc.

If we looked at Kiefer's work this way, without considering where the items came from, what would change? What is added to these photos by knowing their context, where they come from? How might this "insider knowledge" complicate how we view the works?

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How might we view these objects differently if they had been photographed as Kiefer found them, in the trash, or in piles?

Think about what you might take with you if you were leaving your home, never to return. What would those objects say about you, what you cared about?

In what ways does Kiefer's work give a voice to the migrants at the border?

**CREATE**

Choose 1 or two photos from *El Sueño Americano*. Research or read accounts of migrants crossing the Texas/Mexico border. In the form of a fictional short story, imagine the journey from either the perspective of the object of its owner. Include insight into why those objects were selected for the journey.

Choose 3-5 objects that you would bring if you were to leave your home tomorrow, never to return. Create an arrangement like Kiefer does, paying careful attention to design and composition, and background. Photograph those objects. Write a short description about why you chose those objects. Include any specific memories you have about those objects.

Interview a loved one who has moved multiple times. What is one significant object they take with them each time, why? Have them describe that object in detail to you. Recreate that object through drawing or sculpture.

Interested in scheduling a school tour with programming? Limited space available. Contact our Exhibition Manager: whitney@sc4a.org sc4a.org

