

EL SUEÑO AMERICANO

(The American Dream)



TOM KIEFER



Migrant Two Dollar Origami

Carried by a migrant, this two dollar bill was folded into a shirt and is placed upon a photocopy enlargement of the backside of a two dollar bill. The depicted scene shows the signing of the Declaration of Independence. When apprehended and taken into custody, important documents carried by migrants are often overlooked and discarded.



SAUGATUCK
CENTER FOR THE ARTS

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Curatorial Statement

by Tori Pelz, Saugatuck Center for the Arts, Exhibition Curator

In his beginnings as a fine art photographer, Tom Kiefer set out to document the American landscape. Trained as a graphic designer, he applied his eye for striking compositions to the natural and built environments of the American West, documenting roadside landmarks and wispy desert clouds. His photographs have always captured the tension between both the iconic and the ephemeral.

After relocating near the Arizona-Mexico border, Kiefer took a part-time job as a janitor for U.S. Customs and Border Patrol. In this role, his daily routine included handling objects that the Border Patrol confiscated from migrants, objects deemed "non-essential" and "hazardous." Kiefer's focus shifted to a different American landscape - one marked by the material traces of abandoned homelands, perilous journeys, and uncertain dreams.

El Sueño Americano (The American Dream) is Tom Kiefer's photographic documentation of these objects once carried by migrants in pursuit of a better life and confiscated by the U.S. government. This exhibition is but a small sampling of the thousands of photographs of migrants' belongings that Kiefer has taken over the last decade.

Kiefer's extraordinary care for these objects - "sacred objects," as he calls them, is evident in his process that involves meticulous sorting, categorizing, arranging and rearranging. He is intimately involved with caring for, archiving, and preserving the life of these objects that range from the mundane to the sacred. Since he began collecting, he has not discarded a single object, whether a bar of soap or a Bible.

Kiefer balances this intimacy with a critical distance. Unlike other artists who have documented migrant's belongings, the objects in Kiefer's photos are totally divorced from their original context, adding yet another layer of ambiguity to what could be seen as a visual touchpoint to a heated political debate. Kiefer's work resists tidy narratives or partisan propaganda. The formal qualities of the photos - their systematic documentation, aerial perspectives, and dead-on shots portray these charged objects with a measure of matter-of-factness. There are no extras, no distractions, nothing to provide a buffer between what these objects lay bare: the human stories.

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tomkiefner.com

EL SUEÑO AMERICANO

(T h e A m e r i c a n D r e a m)

There is something inherently disturbing behind many of the images presented in "El Sueño Americano" that defies logical and rational explanation: Why was all this thrown away?

Working as a janitor from July 2003 until August 2014, I was greatly unsettled by the volume of food, clothing and personal belongings being thrown away at a single U.S. Customs and Border Patrol facility. For many of those years I was allowed to collect and deliver to our community food bank the food items carried by migrants that were discarded during the first stages of Border Patrol processing. The supervisor at the food bank estimated the total amount of perfectly good and edible food items brought in was well over 60 tons.

The personal effects and belongings were another matter. Why would someone throw away a Bible or rosary? Why would someone throw away a wallet with their identification and money? Why would a pair of shoes, for all intents and purpose "brand new", be tossed in the trash?

The ideals upon which this country were founded are under attack as never before, 241 years since we declared ourselves a nation. "The Beacon of Hope" - democracy, equality, fairness and freedom of or from religion - seems more and more like a sales gimmick limited to certain groups of people.

How we treat others is a reflection of who we are. When belts, shoelaces, socks, shoes, underwear, pants, shirts, keys, jackets, rosaries, Bibles, watches, billfolds, coins, jewelry, cell-phones, pre-paid telephone calling cards, food, soap, deodorant, medicine, condoms, birth control pills and blankets are considered non-essential personal property and discarded, their disposal is a clear and intentional act of dehumanization.

Tom Kiefer
Artist/Photographer



Billfolds and Wallets

After being apprehended, belongings of a migrant are placed in a property bag or remain in the backpack they traveled with. Sometimes essential items such as wallets, money and personal identification are accidentally discarded or mistakenly left behind and do not follow the migrants as they are transported between various law enforcement facilities, before eventually being deported with no identification.



All Star

Migrants often carry extra shoes when crossing the desert for back-up or bring a new pair in anticipation of their arrival to the U.S. Extra shoes are considered non-essential personal property and are discarded during the first stages of processing.



Condoms

Personal items such as condoms are considered non-essential property and are confiscated and discarded during intake.



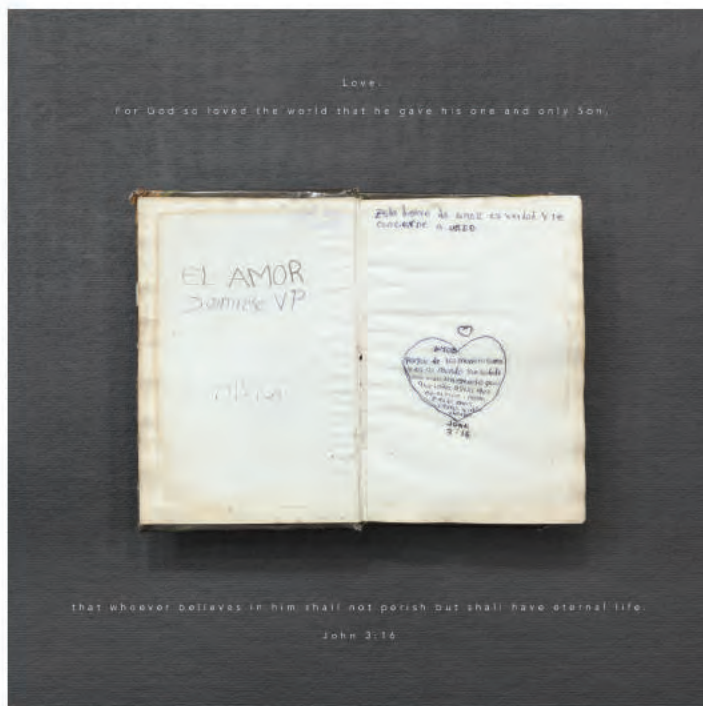
Contraceptive

Migrant women face additional threats on their journey through Mexico and into the United States. While there are no agreed upon statistics, a general consensus is that at least 25 percent of women who travel are sexually assaulted. Along with preventing unwanted pregnancies, this medication can greatly impact many aspects of a woman's overall health. Considered non-essential personal property, birth control pills are generally discarded during intake.



Saral y Antonio

This washcloth was most likely a ceremonial memento and keepsake celebrating the marriage of Saral and Antonio, considered non-essential and discarded during intake.



John 3:16

This prayer book is inscribed by a migrant with a passage from John 3:16. All personal property considered non-essential is discarded during intake.



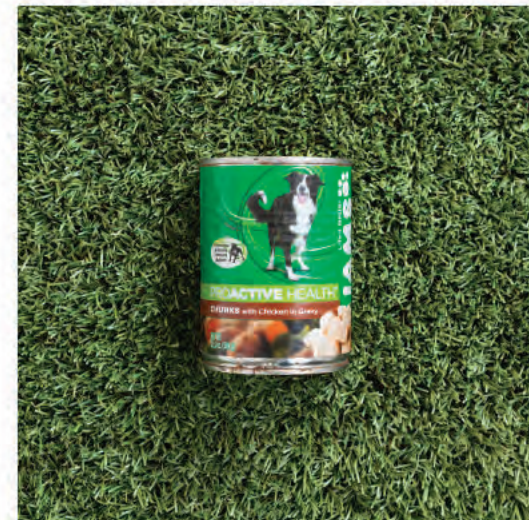
Soap

Soap is considered non-essential personal property, disposed of during intake.



Miscellaneous Bottles

Water is the primary source of hydration when crossing the desert. These plastic bottles, stripped of their labeling, contained mostly dairy-based products such as chocolate milk or fruit flavored yogurt drinks. The much smaller bottles were filled with "energy shot" supplements, which can be a lethal dehydrate when crossing the desert.



ProActive

Food consumed by migrants on their journey north varies.



Satisfies!

The Snickers brand of candy bar is generally the most popular of all carried by migrants and U.S. Border Patrol agents. All food is considered contraband and is discarded during intake and subsequently delivered to the landfill.



Oral Hygiene

Toothpaste and toothbrushes are considered potentially lethal non-essential personal property and are disposed of during intake; subsequently, migrants do not have access to oral hygiene products during the first stages of incarceration.



Water Bottles

Water is the main source of hydration when crossing the desert. In the Tucson sector of the U.S./Mexico border heavy-duty non-biodegradable black plastic bottles are used as canteens and occasionally covered or insulated with remnants of clothing or blankets to prevent chaffing against the skin or to camouflage.



Duct Tape Water Bottle

This two gallon water bottle was reinforced with duct tape as protection while crossing the desert. One gallon of water weighs 8.36 pounds. A bare minimum of one gallon of water per day is needed when temperatures exceed 80° and physical activity is involved to avoid severe dehydration leading to hyperthermia (extreme heat exposure) and death.



Virgen de Mickey, Yellow, Grey, Blue, and Red

Migrants carried extra clothing along their trip through the desert. This finely embroidered women's Disney knit jacket, considered non-essential personal property was discarded during the initial stages of processing.



Young Love

A photo booth strip of a couple, each drinking a different flavor of Arizona Iced Tea.



Portrait 1



Portrait 2



Portrait 3



Portrait 4



Portrait 5



Portrait 6

Portraits 1 - 12

Migrants will occasionally carry multiple or extra passport or identification photos. These photos, with no identification attached to them, were discarded during the initial stages of processing.



Portrait 7



Portrait 8



Portrait 9



Portrait 10



Portrait 11



Portrait 12



43, Neutral

Rosaries are sometimes considered lethal non-essential property and discarded.





Doll Arm

Migrants will often carry a keepsake or memento when crossing the desert. Items are subsequently seized and discarded during processing.



Blood Donor

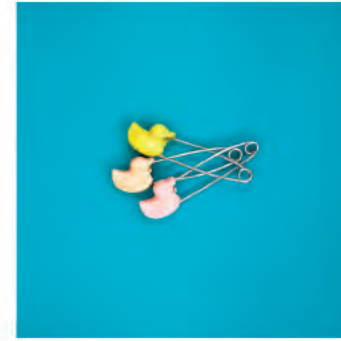
About four percent of the U.S. population donates blood with donations always needed and encouraged. Proof of citizenship is not required.



Dino



Diamond Earrings



Duck Pins



Blue Samsung



Land Shark



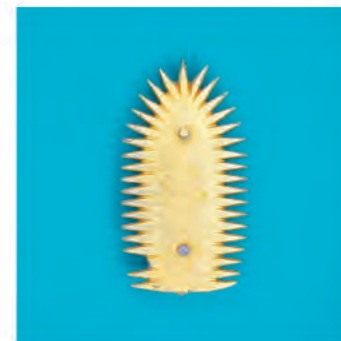
HIM



Peter Piper Pizza



Bob Marley Grinder



El Monsturo Naranja



Blue Eye Zombie



Disney Princesses



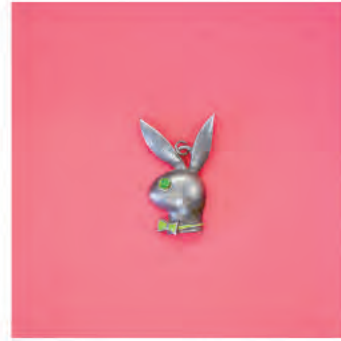
Heart Assembly



Angry Birds



Pink Baseball



Playboy



Baby Jesus



Pirate Coin Purse



Para Mi



Three Metal Crosses



Flash



Chipmunks



Football



Brass Knuckles



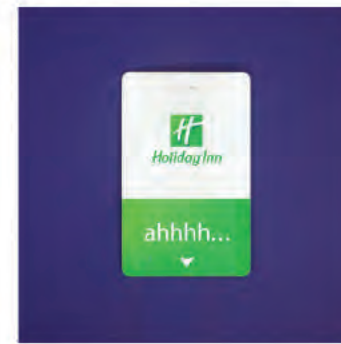
16 Rings



Diary



Alien



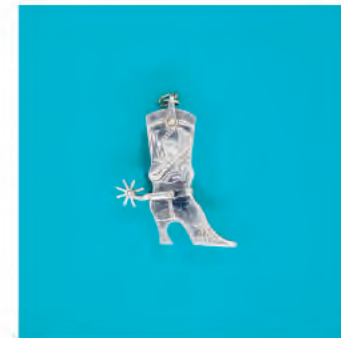
Ahhhh



Baby Shoe



3 Virgins of Guadalupe



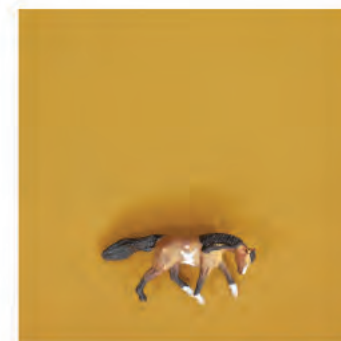
Boot



1879 Indian Head



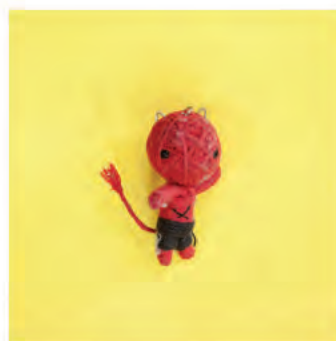
USA Stress Toy



Wild Horse



Beauty Treats



ASU Sun Devil



Jaguares



Shoelaces, Blue

Shoelaces are stripped from migrants because they are considered lethal and could be used to harm themselves or others. Detainees subsequently move through the U.S. court system and are deported without shoelaces for their shoes.



Pink Brush and Comb Assembly

Personal belongings considered non-essential or potentially lethal discarded during the first stages of intake.



Nuria

A migrant carved their name into this comb with an extremely sharp object and then filled it in with ink from a pen. Considered potentially lethal and non-essential this item was discarded during intake.



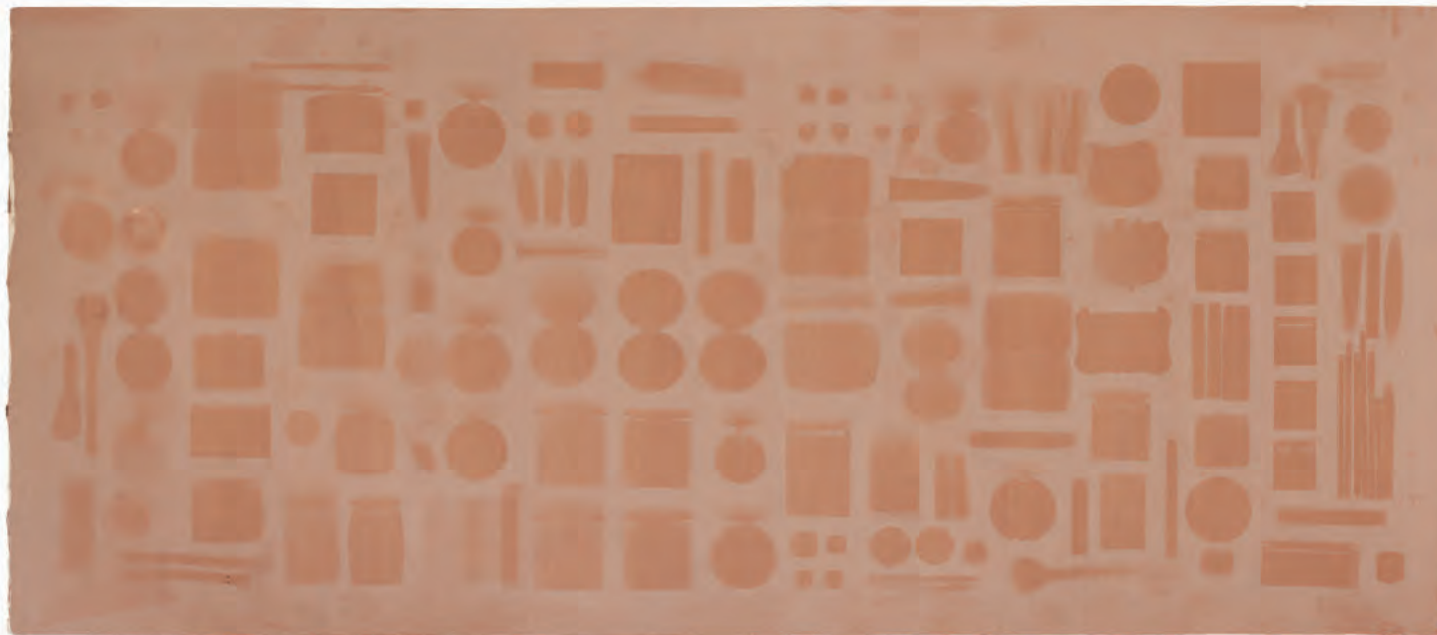
Black Brush and Comb Assembly

Personal belongings considered non-essential or potentially lethal discarded during the first stages of intake.



With Make-up

These make-up and beauty products were considered non-essential or potentially lethal and discarded during the first stages of intake.



Without Make-up

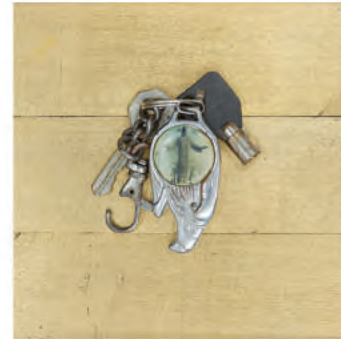
A year's worth of dust imprint after the removal of the make-up and beauty products assembly. Personal belongings considered non-essential or potentially lethal are discarded during the first stages of intake.



Rabbit Foot



Craftsman 5/32



Christ the Redeemer



MLB Fob



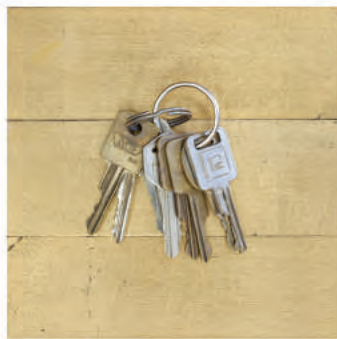
Pioneer Lodge



Dad



Bullet



GM



Hello Kitty!

Various items such as house and car keys are considered non-essential or potentially lethal, and are confiscated and discarded during the first stages of processing.

The Magnificent

My soul magnifies the Lord and my spirit is filled with unspeakable joy,
contemplating the goodness of God my Saviour
because it has looked at the humble his as it has done in my favor great and
wonderful things which it has all powerful and his name is infinitely holy,
whose mercy extends from generation to generation to all who fear him,
He reached his dissipated power and pride of the proud subverting his plans,
he disposed the powerful and lifted up the lowly
the needy he filled with goods and the rich away without anything.
He extolled his servant Israel remembering him for
his mercy and kindness.



Just as he had promised our father Abraham and his descendants,
Which is all-powerful and infinitely holy his name whose mercy is from
generation to generation and so we defend free and accidents,
hurricanes, tornadoes, rays and all evil.
Holy God Santo strong
Holy immortal God Lord deliver us from all evil
Blessed be God, bless his holy name
Blessed be Jesus Christ, true God and true man
Blessed be God in the blessed Sacrament
Forever and ever.
Amen

La Magnifica

This prayer "La Magnifica" was written by a migrant on the back and front side of a Motel 6 business card, located in Texas. The item was found in the trash of a U.S. Customs and Border Patrol facility in southern Arizona. Personal items considered non-essential are discarded during intake.



Animal Crackers

All food is regarded as contraband and discarded.



Protein

Occasionally bags of insects are found among the items of those arrested and detained.
This is a source of food rich in protein.



Gloves

Many different gloves for different reasons. The desert and mountain terrain along the U.S./Mexico border varies greatly with brush and other abrasive plants. During winter months temperatures easily drop below freezing. Drug smugglers handle bales of marijuana often covered in rough burlap material and twine. All gloves are considered non-essential personal property and discarded.



Perfect Man



Crazy Lady

After being apprehended in the desert a migrant is taken to a U.S. Customs and Border Patrol facility to be identified and processed before being transported to his or her next destination. Personal property that is considered non-essential or potentially lethal or hazardous is discarded during the first stages of processing.

A bottle of cologne seems like a crazy thing to carry across the desert but upon further reflection and thought this object is a signifier of hope and aspirations upon their arrival or return to the United States, a deeply personal belonging used preparing for a job interview or other circumstance expressing their hopes and personal pride.

Another overlooked aspect of bringing along a bottle of cologne when traveling across the desert is that the high-alcohol content acts as a medicinal first aid for scrapes and scratches to the skin.



Threads and Needles

The clothing worn by those traveling several days through the desert is severely stressed, ripped and torn; needles and thread are brought along for repair.



Flag and Migrant Blanket

Blankets are used for shelter and protection when traveling across the desert, especially during winter months when temperatures easily drop below freezing. They are generally considered non-essential personal property and discarded. U.S. flag is property of the artist.



Trail Markers

Brightly colored objects are placed along a path or trail to assist those traveling behind them. These rubber ducks were used as trail markers, one of which still had a twist-tie used to fasten to a tree branch or desert bush.



5 Minutos

A small prayer book carried by a migrant, confiscated and discarded during the first stages of processing.



Give us your tired, your poor

The Statue of Liberty was a gift from France to the U.S. in 1886. Using letters from dry alphabet soup carried by migrants, the 1903 sonnet written by Emma Lazarus engraved on a bronze plaque mounted on the pedestal of the statue welcoming all immigrants.

Born in Wichita, raised primarily in the Seattle area, Tom Kiefer lived in Los Angeles for 20 years before moving to Ajo, Arizona to further his development as an artist and photographer and has been living there full time since 2001. In 2007, Kiefer's first project, "Journey West Exhibit", chronicled the landscape, structures, and cultural markers connecting the markers of Phoenix, Tucson and Ajo. From July 2003 to August 2014 he was employed part-time as a janitor at a U.S. Customs and Border Patrol facility near Ajo, which led to his ongoing project "El Sueño Americano" (The American Dream), the documentation of the seized and discarded personal effects and belongings of migrants apprehended in the desert by Border Patrol agents. 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. Recent press includes New York Times and The New Yorker's Photo Booth.