

Angelica Escoto

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Angelica Escoto (b. 1967) is a Mexican artist, writer, photographer and researcher who implements a holistic approach to her practice, spending years on any given project or photo series using analog film to capture atmospheric photographic narratives informed by her keen interest in culture, identity, gender, literature, science, evolution, as well as the natural and built environment. Escoto's interdisciplinary approach aligns mostly with ecocriticism and ecofeminists whose main objective is to examine both ourselves and the world around us, while taking into consideration how we interact and represent the built and natural environment. Artworks by artists such as Escoto, are what makes those intersections clear and accessible.

In her *"Ninguna Ballena es una Isla" (No Whale is an Island)* (2005-2021), using 35mm film, Escoto has chronicled her trips to the Baja California Peninsula, a strait of land that separates the Pacific Ocean and the Gulf of California in Northwestern Mexico. For this series, Escoto engaged in labor intensive research across a 15-year time period that involved swimming through whale channels and kayaking into extinct volcanoes. Barren landscapes and seascapes contrast with familiar motifs such as the artist's own family, the female body, appropriated by Escoto in this case to represent womanhood and femininity, and animals, mainly dogs, running free alongside her in the natural environment.

As one of the most biodiverse regions in the world, Escoto also highlights the uniqueness of the Baja Peninsula by drawing attention to the region as a destination for whales who have been recorded to travel over 5,000 miles to the Peninsula every season to give birth to their young. Having closely studied evolutionary theory, Escoto notes that whales evolved from a canine-like land mammal that walked on four legs and closely resembled contemporary domestic dogs. Consequently, Escoto ingeniously captures images of both whales and dogs in the sea as she swam alongside them, emphasizing the implication of life coming full circle and the importance of this spontaneous observation in the natural world.

A native of Mexico City, Escoto studied Journalism at the Escuela de Periodismo Carlos Septién, and moved to Tijuana in 1991, steadily realizing photography was a medium in which she could freely expand on her varied, yet interconnected interests. While Escoto's photographs are an intersection of various ideas and theories based also on personal experience, her photos are utterly sophisticated in both composition and subject matter, forcing the viewer to critically examine existential questions regarding space, time, identity and the different ways in which we experience the built and natural environment.

In contrast, Escoto's reflections on built environments such as those around border towns in Tijuana and San Diego, implement the use of line, color and form as subjects in her photos of secondhand clothes hanging on the fences and walls along the busy streets of Tijuana. Noticing these stalls during daily commutes crossing the Tijuana-San Diego border, Escoto also comments that the border or *la linea* also marks the separation of an industrialized city (San Diego) and an underdeveloped city (Tijuana) where everything is repurposed, sold and immediately given a second life once it has crossed *la linea*. This series of photos shot in 125mm film, and titled *Walk In Closet* (2011) also highlights the environmental impact of fast-fashion and the role of the United States in this wasteful exercise considering that in 2018, 11,300 tons of textiles went to landfills according to the Environmental Protection Agency. Yet, Escoto's engagement with an often loaded and complicated issue becomes a colorful and expressive artistic composition while highlighting the emergence of sustainable microeconomies that have evolved as a result of the influx of used clothing going into Tijuana.

While identity, nature and the environment have played a central role in Escoto's projects, she has also made important observations and critiques on Mexican traditions that have become widely practiced in San Diego, mainly the concept of quinceañeras, a rite of passage for Latinas on their 15th birthday. With the number of immigrant communities in San Diego rising, so has the confluence of celebrations such as quinceañeras. In the series, *Ellas No Bailan Solas* (They Don't Dance Alone) (2006), Escoto uses content from the 200 quinceañera parties she shot after she placed an ad in the *Latino* Newspaper, providing video and photography services. In this telling series that is part performance art and part documentary, Escoto delved into a world of hyper-machismo, excess, and dueling identities, one in which the girl begins to transition to womanhood and leaves her childhood behind. However, this phenomenon is also at times, misogynistic in nature and rooted in Catholic traditions where the young girl attends a special Catholic mass in which various "promises" are made. This also begs the questions, why must young women and not young men, make "promises" to God and their family?

In her body of work, Escoto references cultural traditions, the built and natural environment, the female body, literature and biology, all to make nuanced connections, while considering the unique cultural exchange that exists within the region in which she lives and works. We are very generously afforded the luxury to view the world through Escoto's unique vision, in vivid and nuanced depictions of familiar places which serve as a staunch reminder of all that we should be grateful for and work diligently to preserve.