

CHECKPOINT

A Canadian artist documents migrant crossings along Trump's wall

By Rosemary Counter

Photography by Isabelle Hayeur



Hayeur photographed asylum seekers arriving in California

QUÉBÉCOIS PHOTOGRAPHER and video artist Isabelle Hayeur has always been drawn to no man's lands. She finds them everywhere—at Strasbourg's Court of Human Rights, amid the scorched chaos of B.C. wildfires and in the deserted region of the Salton Sea in California. But in the case of her haunting series *Borderlands*, they found her.

In January of 2024, while working in California on another project, Hayeur began following reports about the growing crisis at the Mexico-U.S. border. Once concentrated in Texas, the surge of migrants had shifted westward, and California had become an epicenter. Since the border's post-pandemic reopening in 2021, U.S. Customs and Border Protection have recorded over seven million migrant encounters along the southwestern frontier. There were nearly 250,000 in December of 2023 alone, the highest monthly number ever reported at the time.

Curious, Hayeur drove to Jacumba Hot Springs, California, hoping to document asylum seekers trying to sneak past Trump's infamous wall. She arrived to find exactly that. At dawn and dusk, hordes of people would cross through the wall's many breaches and breaks. "Sometimes I slept in my car so I wouldn't miss them," she says. She saw single people, families with children and large groups. Hayeur remained firmly on American soil but could peer through the wall's tall wooden planks to see the Mexican side.

Theoretically, Border Patrol agents would drive up and down the dirt road along the wall to detain each person before either refusing their entry or releasing them with a future immigration court date. In practice, they were completely inundated. Their detention centres were unequipped to manage so many migrants, who were

consequently told to wait hours or even days for their turn.

In the meantime, migrants made makeshift camps, which did little to protect them from the inhospitable desert. Summer days got as hot as 40°C while winter nights went well below zero. Shelter, food and water were in short supply; the asylum seekers, already exhausted and traumatized, also had to contend with heatstroke and dehydration.

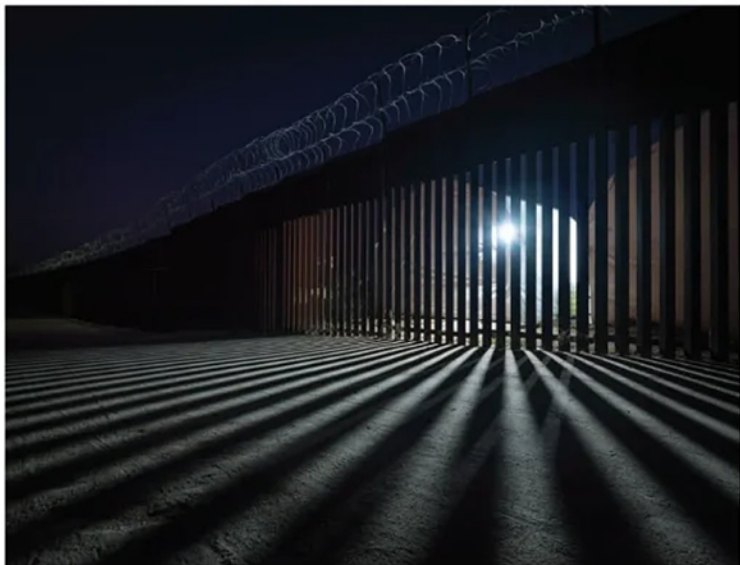
Not everyone waiting at the border was a migrant. "Human traffickers often hid in bushes and told people where and how to cross—sometimes they had ladders or they cut the barbed wire," says Hayeur. Their services came at a steep price. Mexican cartels charged at least \$10,000 to smuggle a migrant over the border and past American agents; migrants who could not pay could be kidnapped and held for ransom or forced to act as drug mules.

It was a bleak scene, but humanity persisted. "Volunteers brought tarps, blankets, food and water," says Hayeur. Migrants were usually patient and co-operative, and Border Patrol agents were surprisingly kind and respectful. "Officers told me the crossings never stop. They know better than anyone what a bad situation this is." As asylum seekers and border crossings hit record highs in Canada—prompting a recent \$1.3-billion boost to border security—*Borderlands* offers an intimate glimpse of those seeking a better future at any cost. In the following pages, Hayeur shares the stories behind some of her most memorable images. ■



↑ "The bordertown of Tecate looks a certain way on one side and completely different on the other. On the right of the wall is a bustling city in Mexico with more than 100,000 people. On the left is an unincorporated community and mostly empty desert in the U.S. Sometimes there are cousins living on opposite sides of the wall."

← "Everyone has expectations about what refugees look like, and sometimes we're wrong. This group all crossed together, each with a single bag, looking stylish and well-dressed. Some are wealthy and paid thousands to come. They're happy to be in America, where they're told all their dreams will come true."



↑ "I stayed on the American side of the border, but you can see right through to the other side of the wall—in this case, to a Mexican army camp."

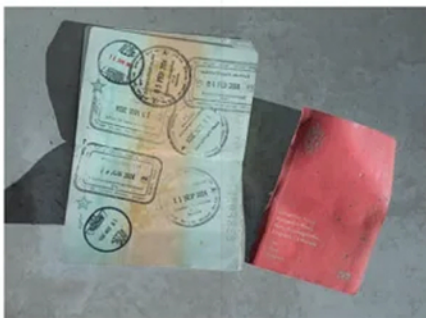
↓ "The temperature the previous night had been minus-five, so locals donated tents, blankets and warm clothes. In the morning, Border Patrol agents brought buses to move the migrants inside to get warm."



← "A group of people from the Middle East camped here. They had travelled separately, but they gathered together briefly. When I took this photo, they had just left—their fire was still burning—and it was an absolute mess. Some local people were complaining about the garbage while others were cleaning it up."



↑ "Usually things were cool and quiet but, on this day, there was an aggressive altercation that became a fight. It was mostly in Spanish. Border Patrol officers were trying to figure out the culprit."



← "As soon as people cross, they discard all their papers and passports. They don't want to be identified, particularly if they could have applied for proper travel visas to come to America. It was common to find discarded passports on the ground."



↑ "This is a surveillance camera in the valley at Ocotillo, California. The dark line near the horizon is the infamous wall."



↑ "Right after they cross, migrants walk until they're picked up by Border Patrol vehicles, shown here. This happens very quickly. Within 10 or 15 minutes, all of these people were picked up and gone, whether by arranged cars, American agents or smugglers, leaving the wall and the road empty again."



↑ "These people were walking along the wall, one of them carrying a little kid. For humanitarian reasons, agents try to process kids first, but I've heard that people exploit children to increase their own odds of being accepted as refugees. Agents sometimes see the same children accompanying different groups."



← "During the winter, six or eight people camped in this tent. The nights were so cold that I'd stay in a motel and come back. It's illegal to offer migrants a lift or a place to stay—certainly people have looked into my car, hinting they wanted a ride. But I didn't stop and kept my door locked. If I helped them, I'd lose my rights to cross the border as freely as I do."



→ "I had filmed here the night before, when migrants were setting up the tents, building fires and cooking meals. I returned the next day, and they were all gone—presumably to the local processing facility. This is their abandoned camp. That's leftover dinner and an old pack of Chinese cigarettes."

↓ "This image shows the terrain as the rough, unlivable no man's land that it is—with this arbitrary, unnatural wall right down the middle of it."

