

NEWS RELEASE

2701 N. Sepulveda Blvd.
Los Angeles, CA 90049-6833

TEL: (310) 440-4500
FAX: (310) 440-4595

E-MAIL: communications@skirball.org
WEBSITE: www.skirball.org



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Media Contacts:

Emma Jacobson-Sive, (323) 842-2064, emma@ejs-media.com

Mia Cariño, (310) 440-4544, communications@skirball.org

Skirball Cultural Center presents

EL SUEÑO AMERICANO / THE AMERICAN DREAM: PHOTOGRAPHS BY TOM KIEFER

October 17, 2019–March 8, 2020

**Photography of confiscated belongings of migrants
adds dimension to current US immigration debate**

LOS ANGELES, CA—The Skirball Cultural Center announces the first major museum presentation of *El Sueño Americano / The American Dream: Photographs by Tom Kiefer*. Drawn from the artist's ongoing series of the same name, the exhibition features more than 100 photographs of objects that once belonged to migrants and were seized and discarded by United States border officials in southern Arizona. Blending documentary and fine art photography, Tom Kiefer (b. 1959) created these images as a poignant testament to the hardships of migration and a call for human decency in how we treat each other. The exhibition will be on view at the Skirball from October 17, 2019 through March 8, 2020.

The project *El Sueño Americano / The American Dream* began when Kiefer worked part-time as a janitor at a US Customs and Border Patrol facility near Ajo, Arizona, from 2003 to 2014. Initially struck by the waste of usable canned goods, he obtained permission to donate confiscated food items to a local pantry. In the process, he was shocked by the deeply personal items that were also discarded. Belongings crucial for sustenance, hygiene, protection, comfort, and emotional strength—such as letters, Bibles, toys, medication, wallets, water bottles, and toiletries—were thrown away by border officials, who deemed them “potentially lethal” or “non-essential.” Moved by the untold stories these objects embody, Kiefer commemorates them in photographs akin to portraits, salvaging and preserving traces of human journeys cut short.

“When I came upon these items in garbage bags, I wondered: Whose things are these? Who discarded them and why, and what do we as Americans make of all this?” explained Kiefer. “My intent with the project is to explore the humanity of the migrants who risk their lives crossing through the desert and to create a way for the viewer to connect personally with the women, men, and children who make that journey and their hopes for the future.”

To deepen its educational impact, the exhibition will also include newly conducted video interviews with the artist, as well as with individuals who have crossed the southern border as migrants. A gallery guide will outline the history of US immigration policy and connect visitors to organizations that provide legal and humanitarian aid for migrants and advocate for a more humane policy at the border.

“How we treat the most vulnerable—including immigrants seeking a better life—defines our character as a nation,” said Laura Mart, Skirball curator. “As immigration policies have taken center stage in an increasingly polarized national debate, *El Sueño Americano / The American Dream: Photographs by Tom Kiefer* presents an opportunity to reflect on the United States’ historic and threatened role as a place of welcome.”

Mart added, “Through these images, we urge visitors to consider the parallels between the migrants’ belongings and our own and begin to imagine the dreams of each person who carried them across hundreds of miles. We hope Tom Kiefer’s body of work fosters an understanding of real human struggle and reminds us of our obligation to help build a more just society.”

Artist Talk

TOM KIEFER AND FRANCISCO CANTÚ IN CONVERSATION | Tuesday, November 12, 8:00 pm— Featured artist **Tom Kiefer** takes the stage with writer **Francisco Cantú**, award-winning author of *The Line Becomes a River: Dispatches from the Border*, to discuss the time each of them has spent on the US-Mexico border.

Related Publication

The exhibition *El Sueño Americano / The American Dream: Photographs by Tom Kiefer* will be accompanied by a book featuring sixty of Kiefer’s photographs. It will be available for purchase at Audrey’s Museum Store at the Skirball.

About the Artist

Tom Kiefer (b. 1959, Wichita, KS) is an artist based in Ajo, Arizona. Kiefer’s photographic projects explore the infrastructure and cultural landscapes of the United States, blending fine art and documentary modes. His previous project *Journey West Exhibit* (2007) chronicled the landscape, structures, and cultural markers connecting the Arizona cities of Phoenix, Tucson, and Ajo.

Kiefer’s work has been exhibited across the US, including the Fuller Craft Museum in Boston, MA; the Saugatuck Center for the Arts in Saugatuck, MI; the Northlight Gallery at Arizona State University in Phoenix, AZ; ArtsXchange in St. Petersburg, FL; and ArtPrize 2018 in Grand Rapids, MI. In 2015, Kiefer was included in LensCulture’s Top 50 Emerging Photographers and Photolucida’s Top 50 Critical Mass lists, and has been featured in news publications nationally and internationally.

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The exhibition and its related educational programs at the Skirball Cultural Center are made possible by generous support from the following donors:

The California Wellness Foundation
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About the Skirball

The Skirball Cultural Center is a place of meeting guided by the Jewish tradition of welcoming the stranger and inspired by the American democratic ideals of freedom and equality. We welcome people of all communities and generations to participate in cultural experiences that celebrate discovery and hope, foster human connections, and call upon us to help build a more just society.

Visiting the Skirball

The Skirball Cultural Center is located at 2701 N. Sepulveda Blvd., Los Angeles, CA 90049. Museum hours: Tuesday–Friday 12:00–5:00 pm; Saturday–Sunday 10:00 am–5:00 pm; closed Mondays and holidays. Museum admission: \$12 General; \$9 Seniors, Full-Time Students, and Children over 12; \$7 Children 2–12. Exhibitions are always FREE to Skirball Members and Children under 2. Exhibitions are FREE to all visitors on Thursdays. For general information, the public may call (310) 440-4500 or visit **skirball.org**.