

Video Walkthrough | Lawrence Abu Hamdan: 45th Parallel

Lawrence Abu Hamdan gives a virtual tour of his solo exhibition at Mercer Union, *45th Parallel*. Speaking to his interest in the Haskell Free Library and Opera House, the artist gives us a glimpse into the stories told in his commissioned film *45th Parallel* (2022), and reflects on what they tell us about permeable borders and impermeable laws.

Watch the video walkthrough on Mercer Union's website:

<https://www.mercerunion.org/exhibitions/lawrence-abu-hamdan-45th-parallel>

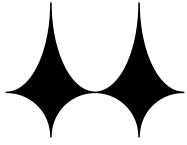
Lawrence Abu Hamdan: The opera house is divided, so the majority of the chairs are in the U.S., while the stage is in Canada. It's probably the only cross-border theater in the world.

Are we rolling? Alright.

45th Parallel is a project that in its simplest form is a portrait of the Haskell Free Library and Opera House which is built in 1904 on the Vermont-Quebec border. The building literally straddles the borderline and has dual jurisdiction, so anyone with a valid visa for either the U.S. or Canada can enter unchecked. And though the line runs through the building, once inside, it's as if the border doesn't exist. And there's the border line again, running through the opera house.

It's a monologue I wrote for that site, but the performance itself is about borders more generally. It's about how borders are these layered spaces, and they are not really lines, but kind of networks. And what I wanted to show in this film is that the border is not only kind of arbitrary, just as it is in that library space, it's there, but you can cross it, but it's also lethal. It's something arbitrary, but lethal.

The idea of the performance was to take a story that had really sort of influenced my thinking on borders, a story I really wanted to tell, which was about the killing of Sergio Hernandez, on the Juárez-El Paso border. It was a cross-border shooting, there's been many, actually, over the years, but in this incident, the border agent who shot and killed and murdered Sergio Hernandez was actually standing on the U.S. side. Of course, the bullet crossed and killed him on the Mexican side. And so it was up to the courts to decide whether the bullet that killed him brought along with it constitutional rights or whether Hernandez's rights, unlike the bullet, stopped at the border. They started to realize that if they were to find Mesa guilty of this one killing, then they would also have to open themselves up to the deliberation arbitration of more than 40,000 murders committed by drones. It's a diagram of an event that starts to speak about just how lethal borders are, and basically who gets to decide when a border is fluid and when it's terminal.



The first thing that strikes you when you go to the Haskell Opera House is this backdrop of Venice, this old painted backdrop of Venice. And what's weird about that is that you're standing in the U.S., you're looking into Canada, but then on the stage is Venice. And so I thought it was quite effective to sort of build on that with the use of my own backdrops in the work. And what's interesting here is when this curtain lifts up, what it reveals is the curtain that you've actually just passed, as a audience member in the installation.

I knew I wanted music in the film because I wanted something to fill that room, right. And I wanted a pedal steel because pedal steels, they have the capacity to kind of break your heart, and they're absurd as a sound, right? And that's the line I'm trying to kind of walk in the film that the border is both completely stupid and entirely lethal. Also this strange, inanimate, taxidermized head of a moose also kind of takes on a different feeling once you've been through those stories. But the moose never cared if it was Canadian or American. To the moose, the border means nothing.