

GALLERIES

At Kingston Gallery, a visit to verdant lands haunted by the Iron Curtain

By **Cate McQuaid** Globe Correspondent,
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"A Thin Green Line #1 (Germany)" from 2020 by Bonnie Donohue. BONNIE DONOHUE

There are still traces of the Iron Curtain along the European Green Belt, the 12,500-kilometer band along borders between the former Soviet bloc and Western Europe. In “A Thin Green Line: Borderlands” at Kingston Gallery, photographer and video artist Bonnie Donohue documents the now porous boundary, and mulls over the blunt force of militarized zones.

You can almost hear the words “never forget” humming through the exhibition, particularly in the video installation “A Thin Green Line.” The video in the darkened room features bucolic images of placid riverways and farmland.

But ghosts appear along the sides of the gallery in a series of reproductions from German border guard training manuals with early facial recognition exercises — mug shots of faces that sort of match, but not really — sandwiching old black-and-white shots of border walls. The disquieting juxtaposition raises questions: Who were these people? Were they trying to cross the border, which today looks so serene and open? What happened to them?



"Der Stirn (The Forehead)" from the installation "Die Merkmale (The Figures)" by Bonnie Donohue. BONNIE DONOHUE

Donohue sets up a similar contrast with her photographs. “The Day the wall went up” features a fractured archival print of people straining to wave over the wall at friends and family they may never see again. It hangs among verdant photos of the Green Belt, some with old watchtowers.

The idea of porous borders like this one is complicated today by the pandemic, which has closed many borders for public health reasons. Still, rigid and longstanding militarized zones inflict trauma on communities they pass through. This has been Donohue’s focus for some time. She has photographed borders in Northern Ireland and South Africa, and studied Vieques, Puerto Rico, where the US Navy performed military exercises and munitions tests between World War II and 2003.



"The Day the Wall Went Up," archival print. WALTER RATAYSZAK/WENDE MUSEUM ARCHIVE

Donohue’s work pointedly critiques Trump administration policies. “Homage to the Butterflies at the National Butterfly Center,” an augmented reality installation, spotlights a Texas nature preserve threatened by the proposed wall along the Mexico border. Monarch butterflies burst and flutter on a tablet showing Donohue’s large-scale photograph of a wall. The monarchs, the very antithesis of a militarized zone, represent border communities — free and unspeakably fragile.

A THIN GREEN LINE: BORDERLANDS: Bonnie Donohue

At Kingston Gallery, 450 Harrison Ave., through Nov. 1. 617-423-4113,
www.kingstongallery.com

Cate McQuaid can be reached at catemcquaid@gmail.com. Follow her on Twitter @cmcq.

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