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Fan Mail

- May 11, 2017 Written by [Mailee Hung](#)

Fan Mail: Lionel Cruet

[Lionel Cruet](#) is preoccupied by the idea of place. Much of his work explores how one can attempt to access the places in which one is not physically present, and questions if these attempts can ever be successful. Of particular concern to Cruet is how race and geopolitical status factor into these attempts—how one's described and prescribed identities render access to, and denial from, a place, both literally and conceptually. His works speak of border crossings, real and imagined, successful and unsuccessful. His pieces describe an apparent collusion of sensory experiences that never quite make up for the real thing.



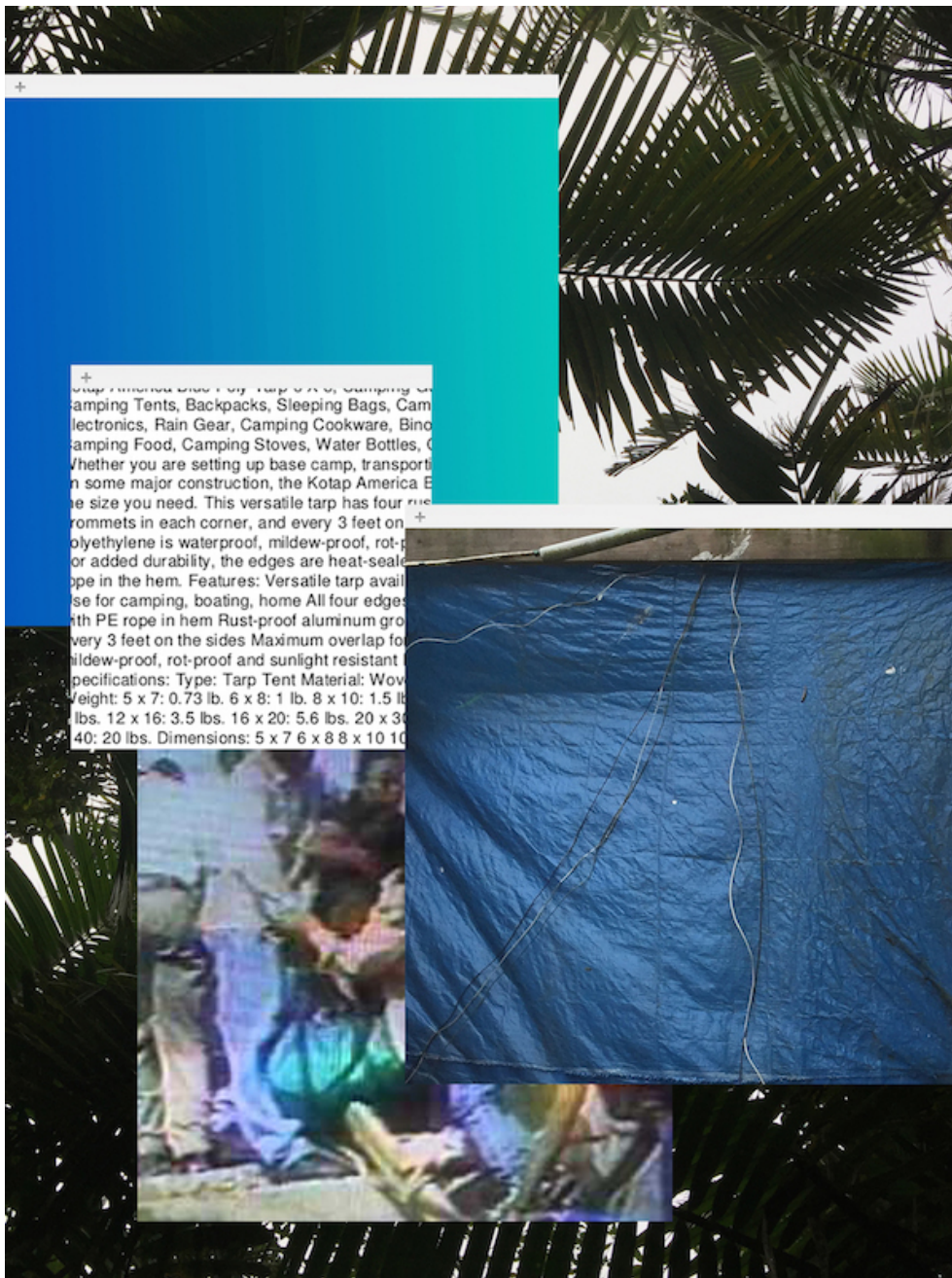
Lionel Cruet. *Intangible Sites*, 2016; audiovisual installation in shipping container; 96 x 120 x 98 in. Courtesy of the Artist.

Some of his works become portals to other sites, exploring the possibility for one to have a geographic experience in absentia. Yet the geographic cannot be separated from the sociopolitical. In his piece *Intangible Sites* (2016), Cruet projects a series of still images and video clips given to him by the immigrant community of Taos, New Mexico, onto the back wall of a shipping container, suffusing the small space with reflected light. The voices of Cruet's interviewees, some in English and others in Spanish, are heard, speaking to the landscapes projected on the wall. For example, two English speakers relate the images to particular memories of their earlier lives in the Dominican Republic and Mexico—remembering other places through their current landscape.



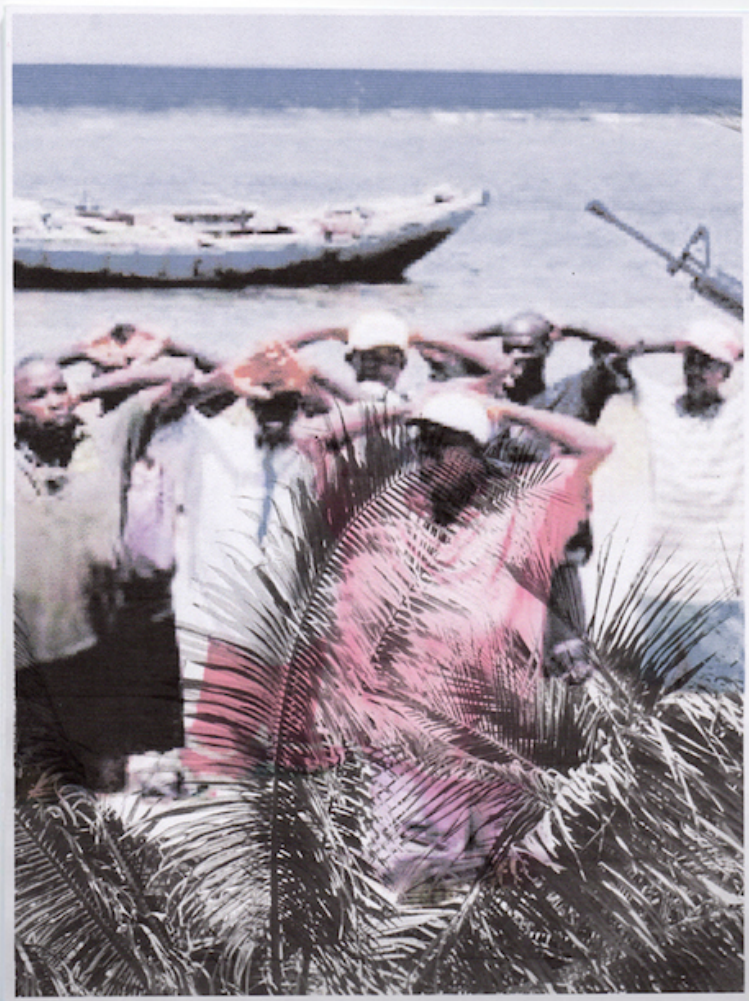
Lionel Cruet. *Espacio Intangible (Intangible Space)*, exterior view sequence, 2014; audiovisual installation in shipping container; 84 x 120 x 96 in. Courtesy of the Artist.

Much like Lauret Savoy's autobiographical journey through the United States in her book *Trace* (2015), Cruet investigates the junctures between physical landscape, racial histories, and personal narratives. Yet while Savoy sought to uncover from the American landscape the buried stories of both the slaves and indigenous people from whom she was born, Cruet, in *Intangible Sites*, suggests that physical places hold alternative narratives, through immigrant experiences; the sites in question are perhaps not of the Southwest at all, but of places further afield.



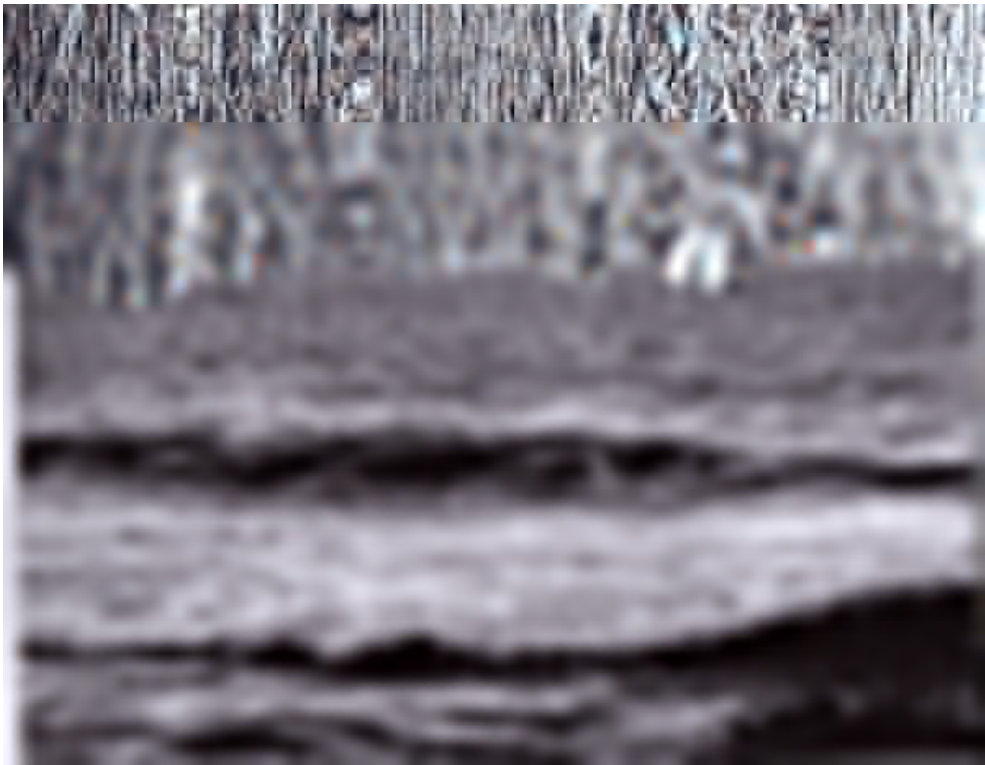
Lionel Cruet. *The Shade of a Paradise*, 2015; digital print on photo paper; 20 x 30 in. Courtesy of the Artist.

Through his works, Cruet asks about representations as failed reconstructions of place; he is curious about where the edges of images, ephemera, and memory overlap yet never seem to touch. In *The Shade of a Paradise I* (2015), Cruet layers digital images within their computer-program windows, creating a haphazard effect like a Google search for “the tropics.” The background image shows the dark undersides of palm trees, and over this are a swatch of a blue gradient, an image of a blue tarp, a low-resolution image of people climbing onto a boat, and a screen shot of descriptive and marketing copy for a tarp. The result is a collage that simultaneously conjures the shining fantasy of tropical islands and the reality of their relative poverty while never showing an image of the actual places. Cruet reveals a lexicon of associations that are used to refer to island nations but that—even when they are attuned to discourses of poverty and vulnerability—can never fully describe them.



Lionel Cruet. *Islands*, 2015; digital print on polyethylene vinyl stretched on canvas frame; 48 x 70 in. Courtesy of the Artist.

This associative weave results in pieces that gesture toward systems greater than their whole but do not attempt to make up for what they lack. Rather, the power of Cruet's oeuvre is in its ability to confer an almost indecipherable complexity through inference. In his work *Islands* (2015), Cruet looks at what is called "illegal offshore migration" and the intersecting ideation and realities of place. *Islands* is an unattributed color image of men captured during their attempt to enter the United States from the Caribbean, printed on a large piece of vinyl that conjures associations of tarps, camping, and rubber rafts. A black-and-white image of the tops of palm trees is partially superimposed at the bottom of the composition, and the colors of the clothes worn by the arrested men—bright pink, blue denim, nautical stripes—bleed through the palm fronds. The leaves conjure a memory of tropical places as well as a feeling of hiding within jungle undergrowth, creating a sense of simultaneous longing and danger. A border-patrol boat looms in the waters behind the men, and the muzzle of a machine gun pokes into the scene from the right side. Cruet creates a visual synecdoche, interweaving a series of narratives into one image, on the shore of this unnamed, but perhaps not unknown, nation, revealing the ways in which the ideal, the personal, and the geopolitical are intertwined in the construction of place. Ultimately, Cruet does not ask that the manifold layers of significance be pulled apart in order to be comprehended, but rather that they be felt together, as a whole composed of powerfully incomplete iterations.



Lionel Cruet. *Horizons*, 2015; inkjet print; 13 x 19 in. Courtesy of the Artist.

Lionel Cruet was born in San Juan, Puerto Rico, and received a BFA from La Escuela de Artes Plásticas in Puerto Rico and an MFA from the City College of New York. He was the recipient of the Juan Downey Audiovisual Award in 2013 at the 11th Media Arts Biennale at the National Museum of Fine Arts, Santiago, Chile. In 2015, his solo show, Lionel Cruet: In Between, Real and Digital, was presented at Bronx River Art Center in New York. His artwork has been in group exhibitions such as SuperReal: Alternative Realities in Photography and Video at El Museo del Barrio in New York, Colonial Comfort at the Museo de Arte Contemporáneo de Puerto Rico and the Sound Art Fair at Sala de las Artes, Universidad de Sagrado Corazón in Puerto Rico, among others. In 2016 he participated in the AIM Program with the Bronx Museum of the Arts, and his projects have been published by Made in Mind magazine, Designboom, and Catálogo diseño magazine. His work focuses on subjects of geopolitics, economy, and technology, and uses experimental digital-printing processes, audiovisual materials, performance, and installations.

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