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Raindance's 'Broken Land' Looks at Fear of 'The Other'



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COURTESY OF INTERMEZZO FILMS

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LONDON — Documentary “Broken Land,” which plays in competition at London’s [Raindance Film Festival](http://variety.com/t/raindance-film-festival/) (<http://variety.com/t/raindance-film-festival/>) next week, centers on seven Americans living close to the fence that runs along the U.S.’s border with Mexico. *Variety* spoke to [Stephanie Barbey](http://variety.com/t/stephanie-barbey/) (<http://variety.com/t/stephanie-barbey/>), who directed the film alongside [Luc Peter](http://variety.com/t/luc-peter/) (<http://variety.com/t/luc-peter/>).

When the Swiss filmmaking duo first went to see the fence in Arizona they were struck by a paradox: on the one hand, its symbolism is ugly, and yet the structure itself has a kind of beauty. “It’s like a Christo

installation in the middle of the desert,” Barbey says. “It’s human madness. Huge nature. Amazing landscape. And this madness in the middle.”

During the time of mass immigration from Europe, arrivals were met by the Statue of Liberty, a symbol freedom, Barbey argues, but today’s immigrants from Latin America are met by a wall, “which basically says: ‘We don’t want you here.’”

The filmmakers decided to stay on the U.S. side of the fence, and meet those who are living next to it. “It made sense to stay on the U.S. side as we come from Europe and so come from the same ‘desirable’ side,” Barbey says. “So we wanted to see how a fence and living in a highly secured area affects people living in that area, how it affects their perception of the people on the other side, and their behavior too.”

She adds: “We realized that the less you see the other side, the less you meet the ‘other,’ then the more you start imagining things, to start to fantasize and to fear. So the film is more about the fear of ‘the other.’ You never actually meet any migrants, you only see their traces: their footprints in the sand, abandoned clothes, ghostly silhouettes caught by the infra-red cameras.”

The filmmakers tried to “get into the heads of the characters and see how paranoia starts building up,” Barbey says.

All of the characters in the film are ordinary people, such as ranchers, farmers, and former hippies, not officials or experts. “You may not agree with what they say — sometimes it is very extreme — but they are being very honest, and that’s very touching, and you don’t really judge them,” Barbey says.

As Europeans, Barbey and Peter studied the U.S. approach to migration as if it were a “kind of laboratory of the future,” Barbey says, “because we usually do what the U.S. does. So we asked ourselves: ‘Do we really

want to do this in Europe?’ And yes, there are many resemblances between what happened there and what’s happening in Europe.”

Barbey says that since the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989 more than 25,000 kilometers (15,500 miles) of fences and walls have been erected across the world, many of them built by democracies to keep people out.

The atmosphere of the film becomes increasingly oppressive and claustrophobic towards the end, assisted by the soundtrack by Franz Treichler, which chimes with the mood of the characters in the film. “The border becomes like an obsession to them,” Barbey says.

The distinctive “look” of the documentary — depicting an almost “alien” landscape — was delivered by leading Swiss-Canadian cinematographer [Peter Mettler](http://PeterMettler) (<http://PeterMettler>). Barbey describes this look as like “you are searching for detail, always hand-held,” adding: “There are always mysteries; it gives you a strangeness. You are never sure what is going on.”

The film, which took five years to make, was produced by Aline Schmid at [Intermezzo Films](http://intermezzofilms.ch/#/) (<http://intermezzofilms.ch/#/>). Next up for Barbey and Peter, whose credits include “Magic Radio” about radio stations in the Republic of Niger, is another documentary, this time about utopias. “It’s about people trying to live differently, and with dreams,” Barbey says. “Hopefully it’ll be more optimistic.”

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