

Jeremiah Ariaz

Fact & Fiction

The opening scene from the Sergio Leone's film, "For a Few Dollars More" (1965) shows the protagonist sitting in a train crossing a barren landscape in route to Tucumcari, NM. The landscape portrayed appears to be the western United States but is in fact the Almeria desert in southern Spain. The project I wish to pursue seeks to create a dialogue between the factual and fictional American West.

In 2010 I finished fieldwork on a three-year documentary project of Tucumcari, NM. Completed during the time of the town's centennial, the photographs document a town in flux, affected by both local struggles and a larger national economic downturn. Change occurred so rapidly in the time I photographed Tucumcari, the images became both a historical record as well as a depiction of often-unseen contemporary American life.

I briefly visited southern Spain last summer when I realized the opportunity to make a connection between there and the New Mexico location I had been photographing. The Almeria desert has been commonly used as a substitute location for the United States in classic 'Spaghetti Western' films such as Leone's "Dollars" trilogy. Also, three film studios created for Westerns are located in the region. Western films significantly perpetuate our fascination with the West, both as a place and an idea. I have researched the precise locations used by many popular films and will document the people that live in this region and the sites that have been stand-ins for the American West. The landscape often depicted in popular films appears empty, a blank canvas for people to project onto it their ideas of the West. The West represents both rugged individualism and freedom but continues to be an unforgiving environment to reside.

Together, these works will depict the often-harsh everyday realities of their respective locations, but also demonstrate how the fantasy of the West persists in global culture.

I have already been granted the time to make the work. I was awarded a sabbatical from Louisiana State University for the fall semester of 2013. The MPS grant would permit me to extend my time in Spain allowing broader scope of the region photographically and greater depth to the finished work. The grant would also provide the necessary funds for production of the exhibition, "Fact and Fiction: Documents of the West." I have been invited to exhibit the project during a symposium on 'Place' to be held at Sewanee: the University of the South in 2014. I have included a budget below outlining my estimated expenses.