

These Haunting Photos Show the Deadly Absurdity of the US-Mexico Border Wall

A collaboration between photographer Richard Misrach and experimental composer Guillermo Galindo captures the austere brutality of the borderlands.

By John Washington **MAY 11, 2016 7:00 AM**



Wall, near Brownsville, Texas, 2013. (© Richard Misrach. Courtesy Fraenkel Gallery, Pace / MacGill Gallery, and Marc Selwyn Fine Art)

The “wall” along the US-Mexico border has always been more a weapon than a barricade. Since the implementation of Border Patrol’s Prevention through Deterrence program in the mid-1990s—which built up the wall in urban areas to force border crossers into ever more remote and deadly terrain—the effort to stop or control migration across the US-Mexico border has proven to be as patently absurd as it is murderous.

The results—the death and disappearance of thousands of border crossers—are not surprising. In fact, the tragedy was part of the plan—the harrowing experience of crossing the desert was meant to deter further attempts at migration. Instead, with the locking in of free-trade economics, climate change, and abusive US-backed regimes in Mexico and Central America, migrants have

not stopped moving north in search of asylum and economic security. Today's hysterical cries to build a wall across nearly 2,000 miles of treacherous and varied terrain—cleaving through communities, cutting into ecosystems, and severing traditional lands—is as inhumane as it is impossible. But while a 2,000-mile “wall” as a functional barricade is delusion, an increasingly militarized zone with sprouting segments of easily traversable fencing (there are now approximately 700 miles in place) however, is the deadly reality.

A new collaborative book of photography and art, *Border Cantos*, by photographer Richard Misrach and experimental composer Guillermo Galindo, captures some of the ostentatious absurdity of the border wall and the calamities, cultures, and artifacts that surround it. Bilingual, multi-genre, international, and multi-media, *Border Cantos* (Aperture, 2016) breaks down the obvious duality of any wall—that you are either on this side, or on that side—and exposes the human and environmental consequences of decades of political recklessness.



Border Patrol target range, Boca Chica Highway, near Gulf of Mexico, Texas, 2013. (© Richard Misrach. Courtesy Fraenkel Gallery, Pace / MacGill Gallery, and Marc Selwyn Fine Art)

Misrach, an internationally acclaimed documentary photographer, is perhaps best known for his ongoing *Desert Cantos* series, in which he portrays the American West in forlorn portraits of our collective alienation from the landscapes in which we live. With *Border Cantos*, he has turned his attention to another form of alienation: the making alien/making illegal of those who cross an imaginary line. In *Border Cantos* the wall, as well as the “spectacle of national defense” in the US Southwest, as Josh Kun calls it in the book’s introduction, seems, when looking through the lens of Misrach, preposterously hubristic—a vanitas of human will, a Mad-Maxian fever dream.

More tangible, and more painfully melancholic, is Galindo's contribution: the haunting dirges he creates from instruments/sound installations concocted from objects found along the border. While Misrach's photographs put in sharp relief our political folly—his view seems archeological, assessing the relics of an already extinguished empire—Galindo's songs and physical objects are more immediately impactful, and sound as if the landscape itself were crying out in pain.

Misrach focuses on the geography, and the wall's collision with it. His photographs seem to be doing what a wall wants of you: halt, confront. But Misrach's confrontation is also an exposure: Little is hidden from his prying lens. The total lunacy of the border wall initiative, for example, is laid bare in a photograph of a short segment of wall in Los Indios, Texas. In this revealing (and beautiful) image, a lonely 36-slat segment of the fence stands in a small patch of grass surrounded by a foggy dirt field crisscrossed in tire tracks. The "wall" here seems more like a preserved relic or a museum piece—a remembrance of horrors past—than any functional element of a security apparatus. And yet for anyone without the proper documentation who climbs over (or very easily ambles around) that section of wall, hence eluding "examination or inspection by immigration officers" (a federal crime), it is far from an empty or antiquated signifier; that one-step transgression could unleash the full force of an abusive and judiciously exempt agency to hunt you down and terrorize your body.



Wall, Los Indios, Texas, 2015. (© Richard Misrach. Courtesy Fraenkel Gallery, Pace / MacGill Gallery, and Marc Selwyn Fine Art)

The near-whimsical placement of segments of wall like that in Los Indios is driven by criteria far removed from national security. As Juanita Sundberg, associate professor of geography at the University of British Columbia, found when she examined wall construction in the mid-2000s, site selection was determined primarily by cost, not effectiveness in stopping undocumented

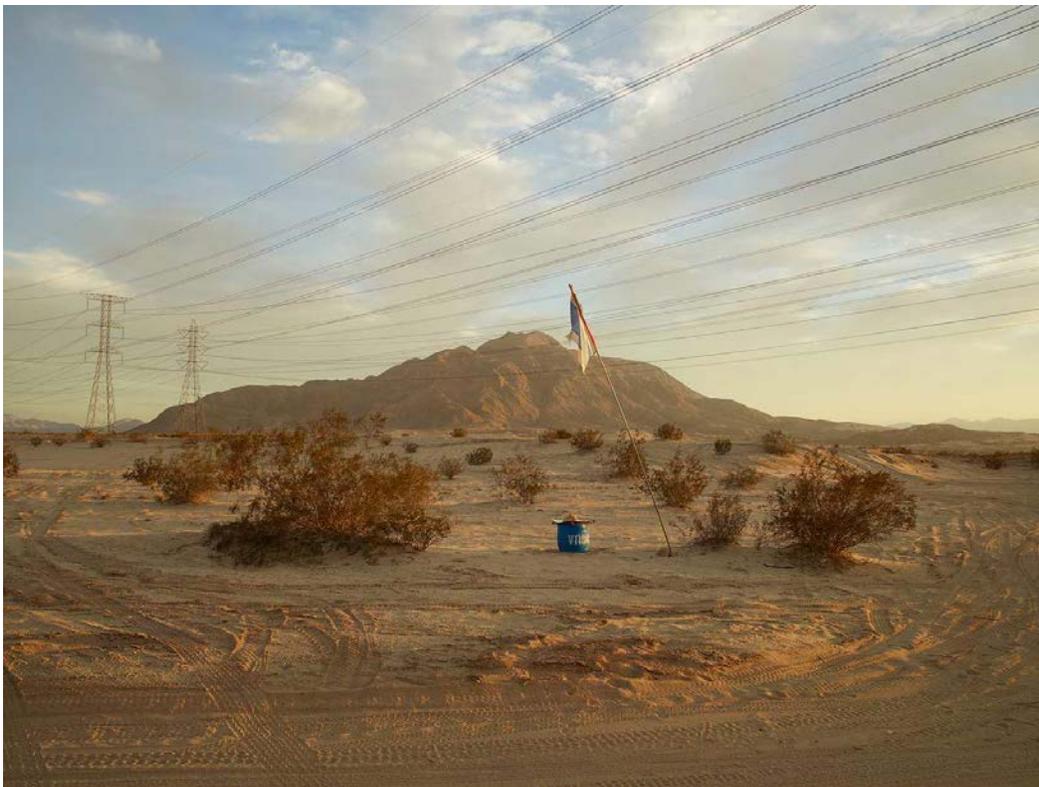
migration. Sundberg remarks: “How this priority articulates with the stated goal of securing the border, preventing terrorism, and reducing unauthorized entries into the US remains unclear.” This is but one example of the US government’s determined fatuity that Misrach captures: the steel insistence of a deadly fool’s errand. Since 1994 the buildup of the wall has led to *at least* 7,000 migrant deaths in the borderlands. Kun accurately calls these vast expanses of desert borderlands “sun-bleached death zones, blistering and unforgiving sites of mass migrant death and disappearance.”

But the wall doesn’t just kill humans; it is also environmentally destructive—a fact Misrach repeatedly depicts: The wall cutting deep wounds into pristine desert valleys, huffing and humping sinusoidally over hills towards the horizon, or splayed out in giant X-shaped fences collecting windblown debris—priming the land for floods. In 2008 former Secretary of Homeland Security Michael Chertoff, in a seemingly desperate effort to “build that wall,” as xenophobes are once again intoning today, waived 36 federal laws, including the National Environmental Policy Act, the Endangered Species Act, the Clean Water Act, the Clean Air Act, and the Migratory Bird Act, among 31 others, in order to build the roads, haul in construction equipment, and erect the steel fences. Construction costs currently run between \$4 and \$12 million per mile. The initial sticker shock, however, fails to capture the booming futility of the entire border enforcement regime: nearly \$14 billion a year for the Border Patrol, over \$6 billion for Immigration and Customs Enforcement, and that’s not counting the exorbitant tab of immigration detention (another \$2 billion a year). Meanwhile, a US-fueled-and-funded drug war in Central America is sending tens of thousands scuttling for safety, heading straight for that wall.



Effigy #2, near Jacumba, California, 2009. (© Richard Misrach. Courtesy Fraenkel Gallery, Pace / MacGill Gallery, and Marc Selwyn Fine Art)

Along this “*herida abierta*”—this open wound, as writer and queer theorist Gloria Anzaldúa famously called the border—“where the Third World grates against the First and bleeds,” Misrach is confronted by the grotesque. In his chapter “The Effigies,” he chronicles a series of nightmarish mannequins constructed of found migrant clothing pilloried on agave-stalk Xs near Jacumba, California. He came across these strange figures unexpectedly, and questions in his introduction to the chapter if they are “whimsical sculptures? Signs of protest? Stand-ins for missing migrants? Were they meant as warnings? Symbols? Deterrents?” The crucified scarecrows offer no answers, though they seem to embody the gothic cocktail of fear, violence, and beauty that abounds in the borderlands. In another of his chapters Misrach photographs a Border Patrol shooting range, where the ground is peppered with thousands of colorful shell casings. The images disturbingly echo another of his photographs: a bullet-ridden water station (a humanitarian-aid effort to provide water to crossing migrants) in Carrizo Creek Gorge, California. Is it vigilantes who shoot these life-saving water stations? Or the Border Patrol agents themselves?



Agua #10, near Calexico, California, 2014. (© Richard Misrach. Courtesy Fraenkel Gallery, Pace / MacGill Gallery, and Marc Selwyn Fine Art)

There may be snatches of beauty in human folly—and Misrach brings them out in photos of the wall’s silent denial of humanity—but fear, drama, and human pathos come to the surface in Galindo’s sound installations. In one example, a piñata (inspired both by a Mexican soccer ball found stranded on the US side of the wall and the West African instrument called a *shekeré*) is gaily festooned with spent shotgun shells. Galindo is a self-described “sonic architect, performance artist, and Jungian Tarotist,” as well as composer and performance artist, from Mexico and currently a professor at California College of the Arts in Oakland.



Guillermo Galindo, *Piñata de cartuchos* (Shell Piñata), 2014. (© Guillermo Galindo and Richard Misrach)

In his work, harking back to pre-Colombian musical traditions, he creates “cyber-totemic” objects in which “there is an intimate connection between the sound of an object and the material” from which it is made. The strange catapult/torture-looking device he calls a “Zapatello” embodies this raw intimacy between substance and sound. Maybe as hard to describe as it was to construct, Galindo’s *Zapatello* is an homage to Leonardo da Vinci’s *Martello a Camme*, basically a “mechanized hammering machine,” with two drumsticks made out of a found migrant shoe and glove, a Border Patrol drag-tire as the drum head, human-shaped targets as gears, plus a donkey jaw and a ram’s horn that work as the gear-stops.



The shoe and glove pound—when the handle is cranked—the rawhide-covered drag-tire drum. (Border Patrol agents drag tires behind their trucks to smooth out sand and dirt and make tracking border crossers easier. Migrants, in turn, wear carpet or foam slippers to make tracking harder.) Galindo’s instrument is ugly, and produces a nagging, syncopated beat, and yet he plays it (or maybe better, engages it) in a moving musical performance (self-accompanied with migrant water-bottle maraca—an *Agitanque*, he calls it—and the shotgun-shell soccer ball *shekeré*) evoking the raw, desperate spirit of border crossing.

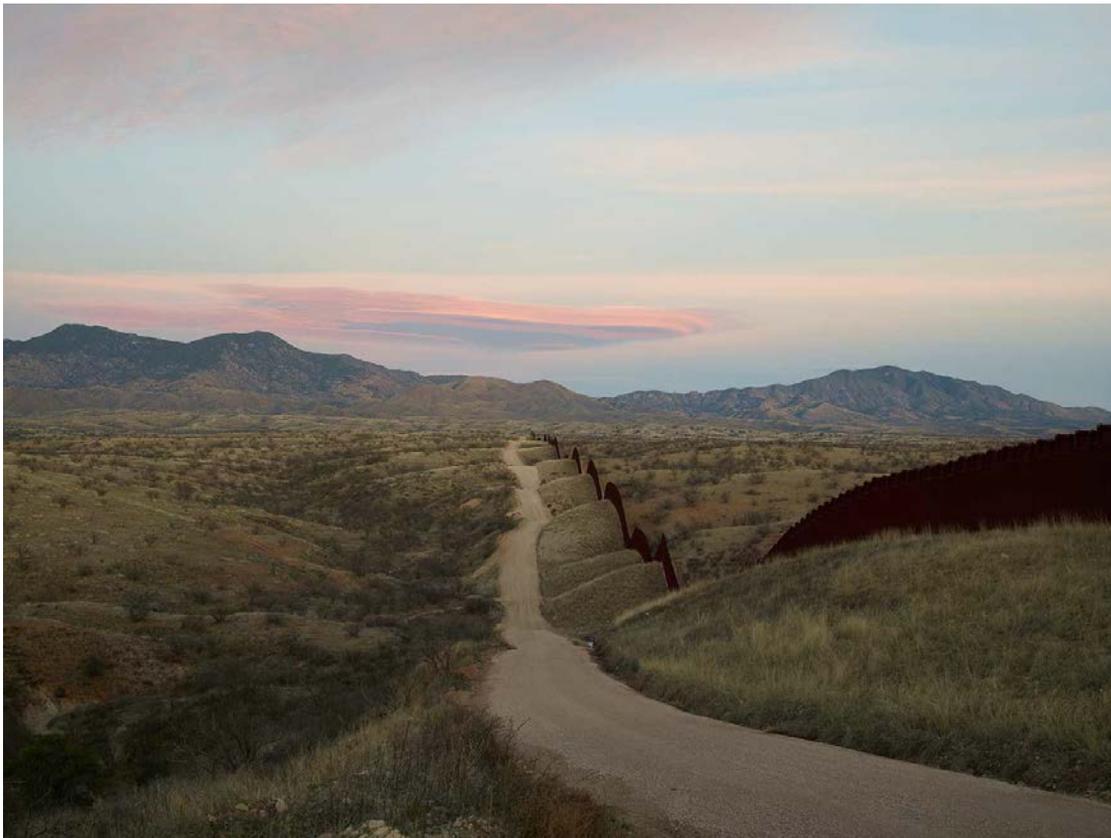
In another sound installation he calls a “Ropófono,” Galindo builds a loom, “a powerful symbol of home and tradition in Latin America,” out of discarded migrant

Guillermo Galindo, *Zapatello*, 2014. (© Guillermo Galindo and Richard Misrach)

clothing, on which contact microphones amplify the weave of the cloth as it spins around a rolling pin. The noise is scratchy, percussive—the sound of swishing pants, or a body dragging along the dirt—nothing musical or beautiful about it—but, as Kun describes, the audio loom puts “sound back into fabric made mute” by the border infrastructure. Galindo: “The instruments...are meant to enable the invisible victims of immigration to speak through their personal belongings.”

“Tonk,” another of Galindo’s sound installations, is a “plastic trumpet fashioned out of a Border Patrol flashlight.” The name refers to the awful and derogatory term some agents use to refer to migrants: *Tonk* is the sound a flashlight makes thumping against a migrant’s skull. Galindo turns this instrument of cruelty into an instrument of song. The notes he plays on it, however, are not redeeming or liberating; instead, they form a hollow, screechy, siren’s cry—notes bones might sing if they had throats. Kun accurately relates Galindo to the tradition of the shaman; through his songs he taps into what may seem hidden, disappeared, or dead, but is actually full of life, beauty, and mystery.

The borderland is a zone once claimed by Native tribes, later violently occupied by Spain, then Mexico, and currently, by the United States. For centuries men and women have been suffering along its edges. It is now referred to as the constitution-free zone, where the Border Patrol and the Department of Homeland Security can, with near total impunity, run dangerously amok. This is the sound Galindo captures in his instruments, the vision Misrach evokes in his photographs.



Wall, east of Nogales, Arizona, 2015. (© Richard Misrach. Courtesy Fraenkel Gallery, Pace / MacGill Gallery, and Marc Selwyn Fine Art)

Ultimately, both artists subvert the dominating idea of the border: that it is a static boundary, a force of security dividing or protecting an *us* from a *them*. In *Border Cantos* Misrach and Galindo, working in distinct mediums, inform and strengthen each other's visions to reveal that the continued construction of the border is an asinine (in the word's common and etymological sense) endeavor, and that its consequences are deadly. Misrach and Galindo are not in the business of hope or redemption, but in that of realism. And the border is a frightening reality.

<http://www.thenation.com/article/requiem-along-the-wall/>