

MUSÉE

VANGUARD OF PHOTOGRAPHY CULTURE

JAN 22

Current Feature: Richard Misrach

FEATURES



Richard Misrach, *Wall (with boot and El Doctor Jivago)*, San Diego, 2013.

Andrea Blanch: Your collaboration with Guillermo Galindo, *Border Cantos*, was recently exhibited at Pace Gallery as well as being published in a book by Aperture. Can you tell me the story behind this project?

Richard Misrach: I've been doing these things I call Desert Cantos. They're basically chapters of a long poem. They're portraits of the American desert and American culture that I started in 1979 and that I've been working on periodically ever since. I would wander around in my Volkswagen and just see what I discovered. I really never had any predetermined ideas. And one day, in 2004, I was wandering and I saw what's called a water station; it's a big blue barrel sitting in the middle of nowhere in the desert. It was summer, when it's a hundred and ten or a hundred and fifteen degrees, really hot, and there was a blue flag coming out of it. At the time I didn't know what it was. It was so surreal to find that in the middle of nowhere. I photographed it with my 8x10 camera and just put it away, put it in my archive of mysteries to be solved later. Then, in 2009, wandering around the desert working on my projects, I started noticing that the border wall along California and Mexico was being militarized and expanded. There was construction, drones, and new technology. Surveillance cameras were being put in and it peaked my interest. So I started photographing the border wall and I began making more Cantos. I just wandered from the Pacific Ocean in California all the way to the Gulf Coast of Mexico. It's about three thousand miles of border, and I started exploring different areas of the border to see what I could find.



Richard Misrach, *John Doe, pauper's grave, Holtville, California, 2013.*

Andre: Were you doing these Desert Cantos before you met Guillermo?

Richard: Yes, this is before I even met Guillermo. I met Guillermo I think in 2011 in San Francisco. He had been collecting things along the Texas border and then building instruments out of them and was performing on these instruments at the pop-up magazine where we met. I was making a different presentation, but I was really interested in the fact that I had found and photographed these human effigies---sculptures made from migrant clothing that I found along the border---and he had made musical instruments out of migrants' objects and clothing as well. I thought, "Wow, this could be a really interesting collaboration." So I invited him to my studio and, you know, he hadn't heard of my work and I hadn't heard of his-- we didn't know each other-- but I had these big prints of the effigies around the studio that really resonated with him and we've been collaborating ever since.



Richard Misrach, *Agua #10, near Calexico, California, 2014.*

Andrea: The book is deeply thoughtful. The whole project is awe-inspiring but I feel sad when I look at the book. The photos are at once beautiful and disturbing. I'm wondering how you felt after going out with your camera for a day. What was your average day like? Did it affect you emotionally in any way? Because, for me, it usually doesn't when I'm out photographing, but then when I come home I'm left with something. Do you agree?

Richard: Right, and it's interesting. I wonder about this all the time; about war photojournalists or people who are photographing people dying. I think it's like being a brain surgeon. You're doing a job. You're not thinking, "Oh, I'm opening up this person's brain and their guts are spilling out." No, you think, "I'm doing a job," and you stay focused. But when I'm out there photographing it's disturbing for sure. I see a lot of things that are disturbing, but I put that aside so I can get the job done. This is something that human beings can do. People sometimes have to set aside their emotions and do the job at hand. And then I come back and think about it. A lot of stuff has haunted me and disturbed me and, you know, you try to reconcile the work that you do and make it positive. When I sell work I try to give money back to these organizations. We do fundraisers and things like that because the work isn't detached from the reality.



Richard Misrach, *Protest sign, Brownsville, Texas, 2014*