

## This is what happens to what is left behind at the US-Mexico border

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March 30, 2017 | 10:40am



Guillermo Galindo adjusting the piece Ángel exterminador.  
Courtesy of Richard Misrach and Guillermo Galindo

One person's trash is another person's treasure, as the saying goes. And for Mexican composer Guillermo Galindo, the detritus and items left at a contentious border is

definitely treasure: the makings of a handcrafted musical instrument, used to compose original works telling a cultural story.

Award-winning post-Mexican composer Galindo views his musical style as based in European contemporary classical composition, with an experimental bent and a heavy emphasis on current events commentary. His **Border Cantos** project, done in concert with photographer Richard Misrach, expresses that description perfectly.

With the project, Galindo creates musical instruments out of personal belongings left behind by immigrants at the Mexico-US border — all 2,000 miles of it, stretching through California, Arizona, New Mexico and Texas. Misrach, who has been wandering the desert Southwest for more than 40 years taking photos, collects most of the items for Galindo, who can't travel as often. Misrach photographs the more or less curated trash, then sends it to Galindo for a new life in music. So far, Galindo has created about 50 instruments.



Piñata de cartuchos

Courtesy of Richard Misrach and Guillermo Galindo

“My position as a Mexican composer and a person living in this century is one of comment,” Galindo told The Post. “In this case, I am putting contemporary music into the frame of social justice and change.”

Galindo and Misrach came together for this project in an unlikely way, involving a little bit of serendipity and a lot of chance. During a trip to the border, Misrach saw a series of scarecrow effigies made from discarded belongings lining the country boundaries and photographed them. Shortly after, at a pop-up magazine event in San Francisco in 2011, he saw Galindo perform with items he had found in Texas. Misrach immediately invited then-stranger Galindo back to his studio to see prints of the scarecrow effigies and suggested that the two work together — which they've been doing ever since.

Now it works like this: Misrach will find an item (or items) at the border, and email Galindo to see if it's worthy of an instrument. If it is, he mails it to Galindo. From there, Galindo will do what he can to determine how to make that particular item into an instrument while still letting the soul of the piece shine through.

“[I take the] object and start banging on it or rubbing it and see how it can make sound, and then I see if it can become a resonant box or chamber,” Galindo said. “I see if it's strong enough to hold some strings. It's different for every object. As opposed to traditional instrument building in which you impose the sound you want to hear upon the object, in this case you listen to the voice of the object and allow the object to talk in its own voice.”

That's Galindo's Mesoamerican heritage coming into play. Aztec cultures believe that every object has a soul and a personality full of experiences that make each item sacred. Galindo wants to be sure he's honoring that tradition with every instrument he makes, paying homage to both the item's soul and music's ability to become a healing device rather than purely aesthetic. He's used myriad objects to make them, too — from discarded backpacks and clothing to inner tubes used to cross the Rio Grande and shotgun shells from a Border Patrol target range. Those shotgun shells became an instrument called the Shell Piñata, modeled after the Cuban shekeré and inspired by a soccer ball left at the border, with the shells as noisemakers. The piñata makes a light percussive noise, which Galindo says sounds like “soft organic water over pebbles.”



Galindo and Ángel exterminador (Exterminating Angel.)  
Courtesy of Richard Misrach and Guillermo Galindo

He's even used parts of the currently standing wall itself to build a gong called the Exterminating Angel. The frame is made from wood blocking used at the wall, but formed into a gallows shape. The gong itself is twisted scrap metal from the wall and looks like hanging angel wings.

Not everything becomes an instrument, either. Galindo once printed musical scores on tattered flags that marked water stations set out in the desert so migrants wouldn't die in the heat.

"A lot of people see these items along the border and talk about it as trash," Misrach said. "But they're not trash. These items in particular, a lot of them traveled maybe 2,000 miles across the desert from Central America. They have a history. You start to think about who carried them and their story and it becomes very potent."

Once Galindo has created his instruments, he develops a composition to go along with them. Some items come together for multi-instrument structured performances (such as

one that uses eight pieces for a nearly 4½-hour show); some are only performed live; and some are put in a performance of controlled improvisation. The nature of each item dictates the music and the composition. Galindo wants to ensure the pieces are able to speak for themselves and to dialogue with each other — while also ensuring that his own unique voice is coming through.

“My goal in composition is to not sound like anything else I’ve heard before, which is very difficult,” he said. “There’s always some kind of influence we have that is going to come out in the music. When a composer finds his or her own voice, it doesn’t sound like anything else. It just sounds like that person.”



Llantambores, made with drums capped with skins from inner tubes used to cross the Rio Grande into Texas.

Courtesy of Richard Misrach and Guillermo Galindo

Overall, the Border Cantos project, with these unique instruments and pieces of music, works to show the reality of the border struggle through tragic beauty. But it isn’t forced. The project allows observers and listeners to make up their own minds about the meaning behind the project — Galindo and Misrach are simply presenting evidence of the controversial would-be wall (and the portions of wall that are already there) and not

dictating anything. And from what they've seen, that meaning and interpretation of the project from the viewer's end has been rapidly changing along with viewpoints and politics across the country.

"It's not only the politics changing the work, but the meaning of the work is transforming as things move forward," Galindo said. "When we started, the campaign was going on, and now Trump is president. The meaning keeps changing as the rhetoric of the government and the humanitarian crisis keeps changing."

Misrach agrees.

"It's a great meditation on the issues," he said. "The border is a really complicated political issue and it needs to be addressed in real ways. We're countering superficial politics with a more sober meditative reflection on what's actually happening there. This is not going to go away with \$25 billion of more walls. That's not going to deal with the issue."

Galindo and Misrach will present the next Border Cantos show and performance at the Pace Gallery in New York, from June 28 to Aug. 18.