

# Border Signs

Photographs by Richard Misrach

Although Richard Misrach has been photographing the American desert for more than 40 years, it wasn't until 2009 that he decided to turn his full attention to the 1,969-mile border between the United States and Mexico. The multibillion-dollar barrier under construction, with long sections made out of Corten steel, was radically reconfiguring the landscape. It was, he says, an eye-opener—he saw the border as a place where politics and culture collided against each other with unexpected, and often tragic, implications. Misrach has always been interested in what he calls “traces of the future,” objects whose meanings are not clear when he photographs them but that emerge over time, signaling a new historic moment. The building of the border wall was one such moment. Ever since, he has traveled from the Pacific Ocean to the Gulf of Mexico six times a year looking for the future.

For most of his career, Misrach has worked alone, but two years ago, he began to collaborate with the composer Guillermo Galindo. Galindo's music, written for instruments made from objects found along the border, will interact with Misrach's photographs in an exhibition that the San Jose Museum of Art is mounting in the spring of 2016. The exhibition will tour the country through 2018, and Aperture will publish a book documenting the collaboration. These photographs appear here for the first time.

## Misrach:

“All the photographs are about found objects—shotgun shells from a Border Patrol shooting range, a soccer ball, a boot, a Spanish translation of *Doctor Zhivago*—that are banal but laden with meaning. I'm always on the lookout for the anomalous. Early in 2014, about an hour from Brownsville, Texas, I found a girl's tweezers, a ball, two Bibles, and a child's tennis shoes. Along the border, you're constantly stumbling across discarded migrants' clothes, but what made this time so eerie was that all I found were children's items and clothes. It wasn't until several months later, when I heard the news reports about the wave of unaccompanied children crossing the border, that I understood what I saw. Whenever I go to the desert, I discover things that are unusual. I may not know what they are, but I know a potent narrative will follow in the months or years ahead.”

## Misrach:

“Along the border, there are miles and miles of roads, going back to the 1920s, that have been built by the Border Patrol. They're called ‘drag roads,’ because the Patrol drags whatever's at hand—metal roofing, chain-link fencing, but mostly big tires—to smooth out the road. Sometimes they're weighed down by stones or anvils. Lately, the Patrol has been using what looks like car-wash brushes. They do this every day. By smoothing the road, they can detect any signs of human activity—to see if anyone has crossed. It's an old Native American trick called ‘cutting for sign.’ In response, the migrants wrap carpet around their feet with twine to make booties that don't leave marks. As soon as they're on the other side of the road, they discard the carpet. You find pieces everywhere.”

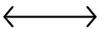
## Misrach:

Misrach: “When I stumbled upon these human effigies along the California–Mexico border in 2009, the project suddenly became real for me. Here were these objects—made with agave sticks and hung with discarded clothes like scarecrows—that were so disturbing and haunting and mysterious. Were they meant to warn the immigrants coming over the mountain pass? Were they created to protest the Border Patrol? Or were they simply intended as art? They’re so open to interpretation.”

### **Misrach:**

“The wall separating Tijuana and San Diego with its thick vertical bars reminds me of a jail cell. On the Tijuana side, families are on the beach, playing in the surf, barbecuing, sunning themselves. On the U.S. side, because it’s so militarized, no one is enjoying the beach.”

### **Scroll to look left and right**



In November 2011, Misrach participated in a Pop-Up Magazine event in San Francisco. One of his fellow contributors was Galindo, who performed a piece with the writer Daniel Alarcón, in which the instruments were made from objects found along the border. Struck by the resonance between his photographs and Galindo’s music, Misrach says he had shivers. A few months later, the two decided to collaborate. Misrach sends objects he comes across at the border to Galindo, who transforms them into instruments and writes compositions for them. “Richard’s photographs have become music,” Galindo says, “and my music has materialized into his images. One thing cannot exist without the other.”

### **shell piñata**

#### **Galindo:**

“In the pre-Columbian world, there’s an intimate connection between an instrument and the material from which it is made. It is the medium through which the spiritual, animistic world expresses itself. All these instruments take their inspiration from that idea. This one is a soccer ball–shaped metal piñata based on a West African shaker called a shekere, which has either beads or seashells woven into a net covering the surface. I, instead, attached empty shotgun shells from a Border Patrol shooting range.”

### **Huesocordio**

#### **Galindo:**

“It is a zither, based on a small Japanese koto. Instead of wooden bridges, I used animal vertebrae found near some discarded backpacks outside of Laredo, Texas. Sometimes when you pluck the strings, the bones bounce and add percussion.”

### **Zapatello**

## **Galindo:**

“This is inspired by a Leonardo da Vinci device known as the martello a camme, a mechanized hammering machine. I substituted the hammer with a shoe and a glove found at the border. Both are activated by a crank, which incorporates human-shaped targets, used by the Border Patrol, as gears. A donkey jaw and a bull’s horn function as stops. At the bottom is a tire, also found at the border, which I turned into a drum by covering it with rawhide skin. When you turn the crank, the shoe and the glove alternate beating the tire.”

## **Tweezers**

### **Galindo:**

“They’re part of what I’m calling the Micro Orchestra, which is made up of items that once belonged to children: a mirror, a toothbrush, some pesos, gum packaging, and more. Each has its own sound—a sound that we don’t ordinarily hear and don’t ordinarily think of as music. The tweezers are amplified by microphones and provide percussion.”

## **Comb**

### **Galindo:**

“This is another percussion instrument in the Micro Orchestra. I rub my thumb across the teeth, which are amplified by microphones. It’s like a plastic kalimba.”

## **Water Jug**

### **Galindo:**

“Richard found this jug near Ajo, Arizona, last year. Most of the jugs discarded along the border are black in order to avoid the reflection of the sun or flashlights at night. This one was wrapped in a towel, probably to keep the water cold. I filled the jug with gravel so that it could be used as a shaker.”

## **Erjumex One and Two**

### **Galindo:**

“In China, there’s a well-known, single-stringed instrument called an erhu. The erjumex is my version. For resonators, I used abandoned Jumex cans—a popular fruit juice in Mexico.”

## **Effigy**

### **Galindo:**

“This is a plucked-string instrument based on the effigies that Richard found along the California–Mexico border. Instead of agave sticks, the arms and legs are made of hollow pieces of wood, which resonate. They’re covered with clothing that migrants discarded.”

**Richard Misrach’s** photographs are held in the collections of institutions around the world, including the Museum of Modern Art, the Whitney Museum of American Art, and the Metropolitan Museum of Art and are the

subject of more than 20 monographs.

**Guillermo Galindo's** work has been performed and shown at festivals, concert halls, and art exhibits throughout the United States, Latin America, Europe, and Asia. He's a senior adjunct professor at California College of the Arts.

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