



Richard Misrach, *Wall, East of Nogales, Arizona*

Jack Foley

Embordered

“Border Cantos,” a collaboration by Richard Misrach (photographer) and Guillermo Galindo (composer) at the San José Museum of Art

Rauschenberg picked up trash and found objects that interested him on the streets of New York City and brought these back to his studio where they could become integrated into his work. He claimed he “wanted something other than what I could make myself and I wanted to use the surprise and the collectiveness and the generosity of finding surprises. And if it wasn’t a surprise at first, by the time I got through with it, it was. So the object itself was changed by its context and therefore it became a new thing.”

—*Wikipedia* on Robert Rauschenberg’s “Combines”

The purpose of music is to raise the dead.

—“Monsieur de Sainte-Colombe” in *Tous les Matins du Monde* (1991)

One might as well be gazing at a landscape of the moon—what we see is that different from what surrounds us: a prosperous, active city with an international feeling to it: San José. Yet the Spanish name connects to the subject matter of the photographs. What we

see in what Richard Misrach has documented with his camera is not people but a desolate, desperate landscape, a scene in which humans—Mexican humans—have left behind the bizarre, variegated detritus of their lives: lipstick, shoes, dolls, broken bicycles, water bottles, combs, backpacks, a Spanish translation of *Dr. Zhivago*, a bull horn, a donkey's jaw. Misrach's work has been called "monumental, engulfing photographs shot in the borderlands"—the human, all-too-human space between the United States and Mexico.

"Along the border," writes Misrach, "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... In response, the migrants wrap carpet around their feet with twine to make booties that don't leave marks."

"The wall separating Tijuana and San Diego," he goes on, "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... 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's work may be called "revelatory": it exposes us to something we hadn't known before or hadn't known in this way before. It is, in the best sense, *in*-formative.

Galindo's work, in contrast, might be called *trans*-formative. If Misrach's work is stunningly literal, Galindo's represents a sudden imaginative leap. The instruments we see—of various shapes, sizes, angles—resemble Robert Rauschenberg's Combines. It is difficult for Galindo to function in the border area because he is himself Mexican and therefore a figure of suspicion. But Misrach has no problems and sends Galindo bits and pieces of what he finds there—anything, clothing, a portion of the ever-present wall. These bits and pieces are then used by Galindo in the construction of musical instruments—just as California composers Harry Parch and Lou Harrison created their own instruments. They are amazing to look at—real things arranged in a deliberately surreal, deeply imaginative way. One of the largest and most extraordinary of the instruments features a piece of the actual wall hanging in its midst. The entire piece resembles a gibbet but the hanging wall itself looks a little like wings and Galindo has named the piece after the great Luis Buñuel film, *El ángel exterminador*, *Exterminating Angel*—a Mexican-made film about a group of people who cannot get out of a room. Another deeply affecting piece is a ladder going absolutely nowhere, with a doll's hand grasping one of the rungs, a can that once contained jalapeño peppers, and the "booties" Misrach mentions gracing at the top. "The poetry is in the pity," Wilfred Owen remarked about the poems he wrote during World War I. Pity is everywhere here, and despair—but also, wildly, hope. Everything we see here was part of an effort to arrive at something *better*. *And some of the people who left these things behind got through.*

Just to look at Galindo's instruments is experience enough, but to actually hear Galindo

play them goes well beyond the visual feast of photographs and sculpture. “The purpose of music,” remarks the Monsieur de Sainte-Columbe character in *Tous les Matins du Monde*, “is to raise the dead.” Happily, the San José Museum of Art provides video of Galindo’s performances. Strange, haunting, deeply musical—sounds, remarks Galindo, “that we don’t ordinarily hear and don’t ordinarily think of as music”—impress us as doing just that. Art crosses the border here into the realm of magic, and we might well be reminded that the climactic moment of the Catholic Mass—“Hoc est corpus meum,” “This is my body”—perhaps became a synonym for the practice of magic: *hocus pocus*. We feel as though we are hearing something “beyond.” “In the pre-Columbian world,” states Galindo, “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.”

What does a “spiritual, animistic world” sound like? You can certainly get a good idea by listening to these strange, wind-like, rhythmic, incantatory sounds. It is a music which is itself on the border between the avant-garde and the ethnic—between two worlds—and which, as the late poet Francisco X. Alarcón put it, crosses back and forth with the ease of a *mariposa*—a butterfly:

sueña los sueños  
prohibidos de saguaros  
nativos de esta tierra

it dreams the forbidden  
dreams of the saguaros  
the natives of this land

(“Poema Sin Fronteras / Borderless Poem”)

“Border Cantos” will continue through Sunday, July 31 at the San José Museum of Art, 110 South Market Street, San José, CA 95113. Videos of Guillermo Galindo’s music are available at <http://bordercantos.com>.

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Jack Foley is a widely-published poet and critic who, with his wife, Adelle, performs his work frequently in the San Francisco Bay Area. He has published thirteen books of poetry and seven books of criticism, including *Visions and Affiliations*, a “chronoencyclopedia” of California poetry from 1940 to 2005. His weekly radio program “Cover to Cover” can be heard live at [kpfa.org](http://kpfa.org). His selected poems, *EYES*, appeared recently along with a chapbook, *LIFE*.