



Guillermo Galindo uses objects found along the U.S.-Mexico border to create handmade instruments for his music. (*Jan Sturmann*)

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Along the U.S.-Mexico Border, an Unlikely Music is Born

By Gabe Meline
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Shotgun shells from Border Patrol agents. Bones from decomposed animals. Decaying aluminum cans, an abandoned boot, discarded clothing — these are the items collected along the U.S.-Mexico border that composer Guillermo Galindo uses in his work.

To many, they would seem like trash. To Galindo, they're objects he turns into music evocative of the immigrant experience.

Galindo is a Mexican-born U.S. citizen who, with the photographer Richard Misrach, has spent two years creating *Border Cantos*, a stunning collaboration that shows the often unseen human element of border crossing. Galindo utilizes discarded items found by Misrach along the U.S.-Mexico border to create handmade instruments, each representing an immigrant's dream, each making music reflecting the memories and emotions of their imagined owners.

Many of them are strung, like 'Effigy,' a scarecrow-like instrument of wood, wire, and discarded clothing. Others are percussive, employing empty bullet shells, stray gloves, or abandoned tires from the border.



'Llantambores,' drums capped with skin made from inner tubes used to cross the Rio Grande in Texas and wedged into a structure fashioned out of carpet booties used by immigrants to hide their footsteps; barbed wire that once served as the fence between the two nations surrounds. (Courtesy of the artist, Richard Misrach and the San Jose Museum of Art)

Misrach and Galindo open *Border Cantos* at the San Jose Museum of Art on Thursday, Feb. 25, but Galindo premieres a performance of his instruments, and compositions for *Border Cantos*, at the Exploratorium on Thursday, Feb. 11. (Additional performances are slated for March 6 and May 5 at the San Jose Museum of Art, and April 26 at City Arts & Lectures.)

Before the performances, I spoke with Galindo via phone about the challenges he faces in creating his instruments, the ways he expresses immigrants' inner thoughts and feelings through music, and the reason he no longer collects found items from along the border.

Tell me how this idea started; to make instruments from these found objects. Did Richard start collecting them for you? Did you go collecting them yourself?

I started by collecting the items in Laredo, Texas. After that, I wrote my first piece using these instruments, integrating them into a classical woodwind group called Quinteto Latino, which I premiered at MACLA in San Jose five years ago. Later, I met Richard and the whole story began. What happened is that I used to go more often to the border to collect these instruments. But since I'm Mexican, I got in more trouble wandering around the border than Richard.

You were detained by the Border Patrol because of your nationality.

Yes. I was harassed a lot. Richard was very nice in offering to do it for me, so that I didn't endanger my life or my being.

When you first receive an object found along the border, do you immediately know how to turn it into an instrument? Or does it take some time and thought?

It does totally take some time and thought. Because not all of the items I do find are sonorous, per se, they don't make sound. So you have to figure out how to make sound out of things that don't originally make any sounds.

What's an example of one of the biggest challenges of that in this project?

The most challenging one is clothing. The first thing that I did was this loom that you turn around, and it has these contact mics for the clothing as it rotates through the loom. And recently, I put some rocks in socks that I'm using to activate a percussion instrument.



'Soundscape/ Paisaje sonoro.' The rusted nails suggestive of the border wall can be plucked or stoked, and the valley floor is covered with pages of a Bible inscribed to a girl, found along the Texas border. (Courtesy of the artist, Richard Misrach and the San Jose Museum of Art)

When you're creating these instruments, is it a goal to express the experience of their origin?

What I try to do here is to have the instrument tell you an imaginary story that it carries with it. The music is an imaginary story that each object has and carries within itself.

What about their previous owners — through your compositions, do you aim to tell the story of those crossing the border?

It's not the journey, but it's more like the internal journey. What is happening inside the mind, the being of the people that are crossing the border. That includes memories, that includes danger, and that includes also what is happening outside. The expectation of *what is going to happen to me*. Good memories, bad memories. Leaving the place where you were born, and grew up. It's all of this, the internal journey that happens in the interior mind of the immigrant.

Your music is often sparse, in minor keys, sometimes atonal. Would you say there is a lot of anxiety or worry in the music that you write for these instruments?

No, no. That's not correct. There's every single feeling that you can imagine. I cannot say that it is happy or sad, because that would be a very wrong way to describe it. There are many feelings; nostalgia, even happiness sometimes. There's expectation, there's suffering, there are things that remind you of environmental sounds. Just all sorts of things there.

You and Richard have described this project as a way to correct the “gaping omissions you see in mainstream discussions and media coverage of border issues.” What, from your perspective, is being omitted from the mainstream discussion?

An objective way to see the problem of immigration, instead of just talking about numbers and talking about human beings as if they were statistics. That is a tragedy that is happening in front of our eyes. We are arriving here to a more human way of considering these issues; for example, in my music, you have to hear the gaps — not only in the music, but the gaps between one sound and the other. The same with Richard's photography. It's evocative of things that are very complex to say with just words. The gaps just let you breathe and think what you just heard or what you just saw, and open your mind and space to see things differently.



Guillermo Galindo. (Michelle Wetzler)

Do these instruments require a lot of maintenance?

Not really, because I let the instruments give me their needs and talk to me in their own voice. I don't force them to do anything that they are not supposed to do. That's my relationship with my instruments, as opposed to instruments that are traditionally conventional, like a violin or a guitar. Those things are made so that you get what you want out of them, you are demanding something out of the instrument. This is the other way around; the instruments are demanding from me how they want to be played.

What about the relationship between your music and Richard's photographs? Does your music ever stand on its own, or is it always presented alongside his photographs?

The music that I have created since I met Richard is very much attached to the photographs and to the objects. None could exist without the other. They are completely complimentary. We spend a lot of time together doing these; we resonate with each other and we inspire each other.

<http://ww2.kqed.org/arts/2016/02/04/guillermo-galindo-border-cantos-instruments-interview/>