



Fraenkel Gallery, San Francisco; Pace/MacGill Gallery, New York; and Marc Selwyn Fine Art, Los Angeles

Richard Misrach's "Wall, Near Los Indios, Texas" (2015), shows an absurd segment of border wall that's no barrier at all.

ART REVIEW

Scenes of separation

Misrach captures the spirit of a border and the drive to cross it

By Charles Desmarais

What a dispiriting time it is, when a wall to divide us from our poorer neighbors becomes a central theme of American political discourse.

One understands the concept of fortress wall — the romantic notion of medieval protection. "Wall," as we might imagine it in this context, is impenetrability itself: bastions topped by battle-

Border Cantos:
Richard Misrach
and Guillermo
Galindo: 11

a.m.-5 p.m. Tuesdays-Sundays.
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\$5-\$8. San Jose Museum of Art,
110 S. Market St.,
San Jose. (408)
271-6840. www.sanjosemuseumofart.org

ments, all of rusticated stone. Wall is solidity, safety, permanence. So much for the metaphor.

But what is the reality of the 21st century wall? In a large-scale exhibition at the San Jose Museum of Art, Richard Misrach, one of the Bay Area's most celebrated living photographers, gives us an image of something far less determinate. Through his description, we see

Borders continues on E3

ARTS & ENTERTAINMENT

Getting across: the spirit of the wall

Borders from page E1

the contemporary boundary not as an object, but an operation: a process better understood as occupying time than space.

Over more than two decades, Mistrach has culled out of the sparse, dry, seemingly leftover stretches of the American West what he sees as a kind of epic photographic poem, an idea he accentuates by calling the series “Desert Cantos.” The current show, encompassing eight “Border Cantos,” looks at aspects of the Mexico-U.S. border, making use of his signature technique of softened color, acute resolution, horizontal format and deep foreground.

The exhibition is billed as a collaboration with composer Guillermo Galindo, who created musical instruments out of scraps and objects found along the border. These are presented as sculpture on pedestals among the wall-mounted photographs; they add visual and spatial texture, but, unfortunately, they seem superfluous to a presentation perfectly solid on its own.

Mistrach’s most effective pictures sell themselves as grand panoramas, but they are not the undifferentiated vistas that make a good travel poster. An immediate subject, seen from several steps back, becomes an element of a broader landscape, a more complex narrative.

It is a stance of sublime detachment, even as it is transparently polemical. Let us look at all of the world, the artist seems to say, not that pathetic element alone. And yet the fragment becomes the whole: the center of the world.

The central pieces of the “Border Cantos” photographs tell two stories, one of fecklessness, the other of fear. One of the most extraordinary works in the show is more an emblem, with the graphic strength of a nation’s flag, than a picture of a short stretch of high steel fencing. It is a corner that encloses nothing, a high barrier easily bypassed by walking or (as the photograph’s taunting circle of tracks in the sand indicates) driving around it.

A richly illustrated book, published by Aperture to ac-



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Above: Richard Mistrach, “Wall, East of Nogales, Arizona” (2015). Below: Mistrach’s “Flowers, Brownsville, Texas” (2014).



San Jose Museum of Art

Guillermo Galindo, “Zapatello” (2014). Found materials and Border Patrol targets.

company the exhibition, opens with an essay by Josh Kun that provides useful context. More than \$23 billion was spent between 2005 and 2015, Kun tells us, to “control the border.”



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An essay illustration shows two young girls scaling some of this multimillion-dollar fencing — identical to the kind in Mistrach’s picture. The caption tells us it took them fewer than

18 seconds, without a ladder.

Other photographs are pure banality. A broad lawn dotted with trees and flowers, a little cottage in the corner, backs right up to the fence; through

the slats we glimpse an unpeopled stretch on the other side.

But there are fearsome pictures, too, even if they do not immediately announce themselves as such. Images of clothing and artifacts, left behind on the run. Makeshift tracking devices used by patrols to smooth the sand, and ingenious contrivances developed by migrants to disguise their footprints on the leveled surface. Tanks of water put out by volunteers, hopefully to be found by fugitives at risk of dying of thirst on their trek across the desert. In a no-man’s-land designed to instill fear, apparently, people are not to be found, but their scent is fresh.

Charles Desmarais is The San Francisco Chronicle’s art critic. Email: cdesmarais@sfchronicle.com Twitter: @Artguy1