



The Artists Using the US-Mexico Border as a Blank Canvas

By Michelle Marie Robles Wallace

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Part of the border fence that separates the United States from Mexico, where artist Ana Teresa Fernández has painted a section to match the sky to "erase" the fence. All photos courtesy of the artists

The centerpiece of Donald Trump's presidential campaign, that big wall on the Mexican border, can feel like an abstraction. When he says he wants to put up a wall, he means he wants to keep fear at bay, to protect some people's idea

of America. A literal wall makes little sense for two obvious reasons: One, it would be incredibly difficult to build; and two, we already have a wall.

The existing wall runs intermittently along the dividing line between the US and Mexico, covering about 650 miles of the 1,989-mile border. Until 1969, when its first section was built, the border was simply an invisible line. Since then, it has been stretched out in sections of steel and barbed wire, lit up by floodlights, and enforced by watchtowers and approximately 21,000 border patrollers.

So the wall is a symbol of militarization, of government power, of man's ability to divide people from one another. But in recent years, artists from both sides of the border have started a new conversation with the wall—one that highlights the constant cultural exchange across the border, and the way the fences separate us. Through their art, they attempt to give voice to the voiceless, to humanize the ones we try to keep out, and to erase what divides us. Here are only a few examples:

Guillermo Galindo and Richard Misrach

Crossing the border from Mexico has become much more difficult and dangerous in recent years, and many migrants who make the journey through the Sonoran desert carry little with them. Still, plenty gets left behind at the wall: worn shoes and clothes, kids' backpacks, empty plastic water bottles, ladders. At the crossing of the Rio Grande, migrants leave behind the inner tubes used help them across; on the other side, there are spent gun shell casings from Border Patrol. Pieces from the previous iterations of the wall sit discarded on the ground.

Those items have become the raw materials for *Border Cantos*, a project that turns the border's trash into musical instruments. Richard Misrach, a photographer from Los Angeles, collects the discarded items and Guillermo Galindo, an experimental composer from Mexico City, turns them into instruments. The music that comes from these instruments represents a voice to the unseen and unheard people of the border.

Take *Ángel Exterminador*, one of their invented instruments, made from a discarded part of the old border wall. It's a giant piece of twisted iron that

hangs from a support structure and plays like a gong. Its sound, according to Galindo, is "eerie and overwhelming."

In contrast, the *Tortilláfono* is a blend of percussion and string instrument that sounds like a very deep bass. Misrach found the metal cover of an electrical box from the failed Secure Border Initiative surveillance program. Galindo cut some sound holes into the heavy iron piece, then strung the cutouts into the holes to use as percussion. Across the board, he ran strings, using parts of the box as a bridge.

Misrach and Galindo are four years into the project—which now includes a book, a video series, and several exhibits, including one currently on display at the San Jose Museum of Art in California—but Galindo still considers it "a work in progress."

"There are many complex layers to it," he told VICE. "I am just starting to understand many amazing things we did almost intuitively."



M. Jenea Sanchez and Gabriela Muñoz

M. Jenea Sanchez grew up when the border between Agua Prieta, Sonora, and Douglas, Arizona, was nothing more than an invisible line in the sand.

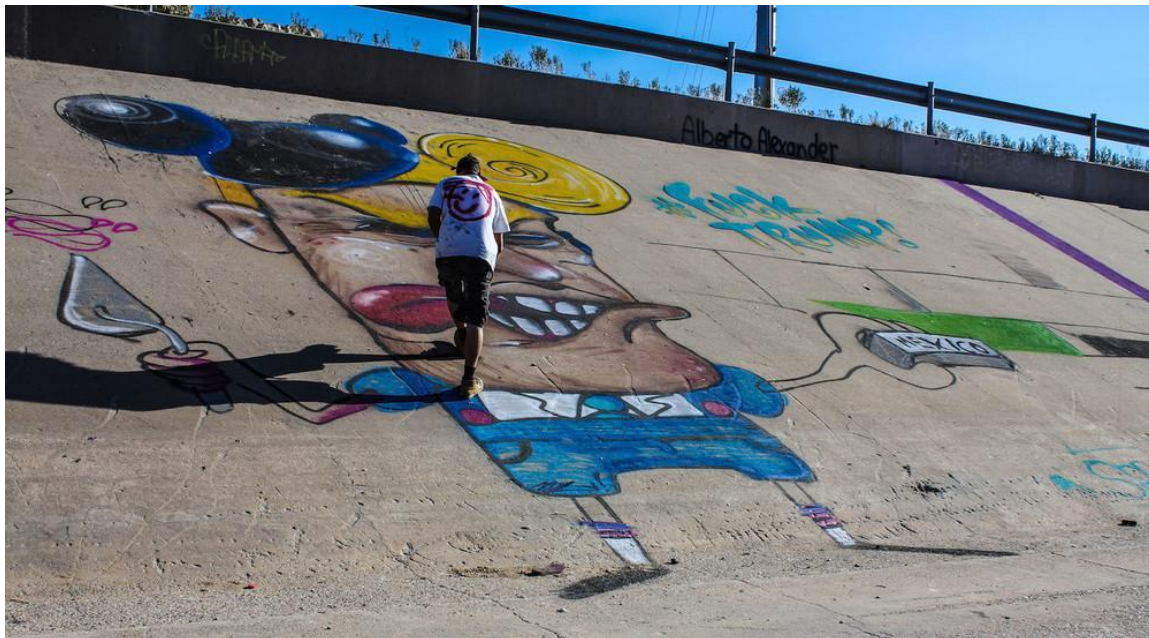
She and her cousins walked back and forth between their homes, some of which were in Mexico and others in the United States.

Twenty years later, that part of the border is lined with steel posts that curve at the top (to make climbing more difficult), corrugated metal, chain link, and curls of barbed wire—materials Sanchez now uses in her art.

In 2009, she created *Border Tapestry*, a quilt made with the wire mesh of the border wall serving as the vertical warp strings. She wove personal, found, and new fabrics through the slats in the fence as a way to unify the lives and communities that were, as Sanchez explained to VICE, "bound and segmented by the border fence."

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The following year, Sanchez met Gabriela Muñoz, an artist originally from Chihuahua, Mexico, who now lives in Phoenix. Together, they wove an image of the Virgin Guadalupe—drawn onto paper made of plant fiber and yucca plants—through the border fence. The piece, which is approximately 12 feet tall and eight feet wide, is visible from both sides of the wall, reflecting the shared cultural connectedness of the two communities.



Guadalupe "Lovely" Benitez, Mario Romero Cruz, and Melo Nonsense

In Ciudad Juárez this month, three street artists—Guadalupe "Lovely" Benitez, Mario Romero "Mr. Cruz" Cruz, and Melo Nonsense—gathered on the sloping cement structure that holds the Rio Grande to paint murals on the border. Juárez is perhaps best known for the violence that has ravaged it during the past 20 years and its residents have spoken of "detenido," or feeling detained by the fear of what might happen to them in the streets. The three artists came together, according to Cruz, to give Juárez something besides violence and fear to be remembered for.

Cruz painted an ouroboros, a snake eating its own tail, for a piece called *Casacabel Enplumada*. He says he wanted to honor the migrants who die in their attempts to cross the border in the context of the border as a place of flux, where the constant flow of people, ideas, and culture back and forth creates something new.

Guadalupe Benitez, who signs her work as Lovely, painted a piece titled *Mi Vida* on the Mexican side of the river. She set the naked torso of a female against a teal and turquoise background that is reminiscent of both a lush natural setting and the auras that surround images of the Virgin Guadalupe—a comment on the violence toward women that has defined Juárez.

Next to Benitez's work, Melo Nonsense, a street artist and graphic designer, spray-painted an image titled *Fuck Trump*. In it, Trump wears Mickey Mouse ears over a bright yellow swirl of hair and his tongue sticks out as he adds another brick, labeled "Mexico," to the wall he's building. Nonsense placed the mural where Americans could see it, to "convince them not to vote for Trump, because to divide nations will not solve anything."



Ana Teresa Fernández

In 2011, San Francisco-based artist Ana Teresa Fernández had the idea to "bring the sky back down and let nature replace a man-made structure that is built to separate us." Fernández painted a 30-foot-long and 20-foot-high section of fence a shade of blue to match the sky. From a distance, the painted section blends in with the sky behind it, as if that part of the wall were cut away.

Borrando la Frontera—a name that encompasses her first mural in Tijuana and five others that came later—became instantly popular. After the second iteration in 2015, more and more people reached out to Fernández and she organized a collaboration to bring down the sky simultaneously.

This April, groups in Mexicali, Agua Prieta, and Ciudad Juárez painted 40- to 50-foot-long sections of the border wall sky-blue at the same time, collectively erasing the border—as if, in some parts, it was never there at all.

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