

'A time for guerrilla DIY': how the Mexico-US border became a hub for protest art

Donald Trump's executive order to build a border wall has caused frustration and anger, but it's also shining a light on an urgent and focused set of artists



'We've been arrested and fined many times, but since we were criticizing the US government at a time when relations with Mexico was pretty volatile, our messages were met with support when the police arrived' artwork from the group Indecline. Photograph: Indecline.

Nadja Sayej

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Save the rainbow and dove paintings for kindergarten art class. The new school of protest art at the Mexican-US border shows how far we have come since the Berlin Wall. Artists are using far more than just paint: they're slapping on glow-in-the-dark stickers, building plywood treehouses and even using cello bows as forms of resistance.

By now, we all know that Donald Trump signed an executive order to start building a border wall and that Mexico is expected to foot the bill, which could run into the tens of billions. Ask any art dealer to sniff around the wall today, and they might say the artworks being made there could be worth even more.

According to Tijuana muralist Enrique Chiu, a bigger wall is just a bigger canvas for artists. The Los Angeles arts journalist Ed Fuentes says painting this wall could be a sequel to the Mexican mural movement of the 1970s.

“The wall may introduce new forms of graffiti,” said Fuentes. “It might have typography by poets and writers speaking for themselves, or others using the wall like a journal to document elegant defiance to a political barrier.”

Japanese art collective Chim Pom recently created a treehouse overlooking a barren patch of San Diego in Tijuana, emblazoned with the phrase “USA Visitor Center”. Set on the private property of local resident Esther Arias Medina, the treehouse is filled with symbolic items, such as books by Mark Twain, in Japanese; coyote fur, a reference to border smugglers; and a plastic sculpture of a grave, commemorating those who have lost their lives crossing the border. A natural magnet for children, it’s also a favourite for Medina’s own kids and their pack of friends.



The ‘USA Visitor Center’, overlooking a barren patch of San Diego from Tijuana. Photograph: Chim Pom

But things have changed since the artists built the treehouse. “There is a border patrol car was always parked in front of us,” said Hibiki Mizuno, a spokesperson for the art group. “We wonder what the US is so afraid of. Even though it’s such a big country, it’s very fearful.”

Other artists prefer to cause some racket, such as Tucson-based musician Glenn Weyant, who writes musical scores for the border. He bangs the rusty fence with cello and bass bows, as well as handmade, wooden mallets. “You can play a border wall with anything,” said Weyant.

While he has been making border music since 2006, his latest piece was created last month. “This is not a time to create artworks based on grants or gallery show potential,” he said. “This is a time for immediate action and a guerrilla DIY sensibility. If one wants to address Trump artistically, they just need to figure out their medium – sound, paint, sculpture – and make it happen.”

Even when they’re caught, other artists have found Mexican authorities to sympathize with them. “Graffiti is definitely *not* allowed on the Mexican side of the border,” said a spokesperson for the art group Indecline, who have created a series of murals in Tijuana since 2015. “We’ve been arrested and fined many times, but since we were criticizing the US government at a time when relations with Mexico was pretty volatile, our messages were met with support when the police arrived.”



Monarch Mimicry, a mural by Arizona artist Shawn Skabelund. Photograph: Chiara Rose Skabelund

Some pieces are more like peaceful protests, such as Monarch Mimicry, a mural by Flagstaff, Arizona-based artist Shawn Skabelund. With 60 volunteers, he painted the border fence white and decorated it with a thousand glow-in-the-dark butterflies.

“I chose butterflies because it’s a symbol of hope in Mexican culture,” said Skabelund. “It’s a great migration pattern we humans need to learn from. We need an imaginative migration policy that allows people to go in, work and come back just like butterflies do – they migrate, come to the US, feast on milkweed plants, mate and come back. That’s their life.”

It’s just one piece in a long stretch of artworks on International Boulevard, which goes on right to the entry point of the American border. “The wall is going to become more of a protest

symbol and it will continue to be until the final act of deconstructing it,” he said. “All these walls across the world eventually get torn down and this one will too, it’s just a matter of time.”