When I was 22, living in Tucson, I visited my then-boyfriend who was staying in New York for the summer. I was a country mouse — a desert mouse, really — in awe of everything, head tipped up to see the sights.

He was living in Brooklyn, in a huge building of not-exactly-legal artists’ lofts, and on our way out one morning, we found ourselves in the newly painted elevator with a Real New York Artist. Weary and angular with lank blond hair, elegantly sheathed in black, yet still casually paint-flecked: She was exactly how I’d imagined a Real Artist.

My boyfriend pointed out the fresh graffiti scratched in the beige paint, chuckling. “They got to it already.”

“Mmm, yes,” said the Real Artist, slow and sardonic. “Those who can’t find canvas find walls.” She stretched out this last word in a way that struck me as both ludicrous and terribly sophisticated.

When she stepped out of the elevator, I burst out laughing and repeated that line incessantly — and, no doubt, annoyingly — for the next several days.

Those who can’t find canvas find walls.

We have been talking about walls a lot lately. The chants at our president’s rallies (“Build a wall!” “Lock her up!”); the discussions about sanctuary cities; the argument over what counts as a wall and what is merely a fence — all this political rhetoric forces us to consider what walls keep in, what they keep out, whom they shelter, where they are permeable. And so we must consider, too, what art is hung — or scratched — upon them.

Walls, of course, are sometimes manifested not as physical barriers, but as institutional ones. The Museum of Modern Art in New York staged its first exhibition devoted to Latin American artists in 1942, and since then, Latin America’s role in the development of Modernism has been acknowledged by most cultural institutions — though in many cases not significantly.

Latin American and Latino artists who engage with our current moment, and in doing so, are challenging what an art space is and who belongs in it.

These days, I think about walls in relation to a number of Latin American and Latino artists who are engaging with our current moment, and in doing so, are challenging what an art space is and who belongs in it.

Walls, of course, are sometimes manifested not as physical barriers, but as institutional ones. The Museum of Modern Art in New York staged its first exhibition devoted to Latin American artists in 1942, and since then, Latin America’s role in the development of Modernism has been acknowledged by most cultural institutions — though in many cases not significantly.

Unlike Latin American art, which has historically been rigidly and reductively divided by nationality — Mexican art, Peruvian art, Cuban art — Latino art is less about a single ethnic origin than it is a shared experience. Now, decades after the first major wave of
Mexican immigration to the United States before World War II, work made in the U.S. by Latin American artists has come into maturity as its own genre. When we think of a sense of shared history, of shared contradictions. To be Latin is, in many cases, to have descended from both the colonizer and the colonized, to be between languages or to mourn the loss of a language. People who identify as Latino might be recent arrivals to the United States, or might have a centuries-long history with land now known as the United States. Latino culture isn’t monolithic. There isn’t a single artistic or political philosophy. And there certainly isn’t one story, one Latino identity. Primarily, however, Latino art is American art, and much like feminist art in the 1970s, or queer art in the 1980s, Latino art in 2017 says as much about the country at large as it does about any single group; the work is both predictive of and in response to the current political moment.

The militarization of the border and America’s shifting immigration policies have become recurring touchstones among Latino artists. Postmodernity, an art collective based in New Mexico and Arizona and made up of Beto Rivera, Cristóbal Martínez and Kade Twist, indigenous artists with deep roots in the Tesuque Pueblo of New Mexico and Arizona and made up of Raven Chacon, To be Latino is, in many cases, to have descended from both the colonizer and the colonized, to be between languages or to mourn the loss of a language. To be Latino is, in many cases, to have descended from both the colonizer and the colonized, to be between languages or to mourn the loss of a language. People who identify as Latino might be recent arrivals to the United States, or might have a centuries-long history with land now known as the United States. Latino culture isn’t monolithic. There isn’t a single artistic or political philosophy. And there certainly isn’t one story, one Latino identity. Primarily, however, Latino art is American art, and much like feminist art in the 1970s, or queer art in the 1980s, Latino art in 2017 says as much about the country at large as it does about any single group; the work is both predictive of and in response to the current political moment.

The militarization of the border and America’s shifting immigration policies have become recurring touchstones among Latino artists. Postmodernity, an art collective based in New Mexico and Arizona and made up of Beto Rivera, Cristóbal Martínez and Kade Twist, indigenous artists with deep roots in the Tesuque Pueblo of New Mexico and Arizona and made up of Raven Chacon, To be Latino is, in many cases, to have descended from both the colonizer and the colonized, to be between languages or to mourn the loss of a language. To be Latino is, in many cases, to have descended from both the colonizer and the colonized, to be between languages or to mourn the loss of a language. People who identify as Latino might be recent arrivals to the United States, or might have a centuries-long history with land now known as the United States. Latino culture isn’t monolithic. There isn’t a single artistic or political philosophy. And there certainly isn’t one story, one Latino identity. Primarily, however, Latino art is American art, and much like feminist art in the 1970s, or queer art in the 1980s, Latino art in 2017 says as much about the country at large as it does about any single group; the work is both predictive of and in response to the current political moment.

The militarization of the border and America’s shifting immigration policies have become recurring touchstones among Latino artists. Postmodernity, an art collective based in New Mexico and Arizona and made up of Beto Rivera, Cristóbal Martínez and Kade Twist, indigenous artists with deep roots in the Tesuque Pueblo of New Mexico and Arizona and made up of Raven Chacon, To be Latino is, in many cases, to have descended from both the colonizer and the colonized, to be between languages or to mourn the loss of a language. To be Latino is, in many cases, to have descended from both the colonizer and the colonized, to be between languages or to mourn the loss of a language. People who identify as Latino might be recent arrivals to the United States, or might have a centuries-long history with land now known as the United States. Latino culture isn’t monolithic. There isn’t a single artistic or political philosophy. And there certainly isn’t one story, one Latino identity. Primarily, however, Latino art is American art, and much like feminist art in the 1970s, or queer art in the 1980s, Latino art in 2017 says as much about the country at large as it does about any single group; the work is both predictive of and in response to the current political moment.

The militarization of the border and America’s shifting immigration policies have become recurring touchstones among Latino artists. Postmodernity, an art collective based in New Mexico and Arizona and made up of Beto Rivera, Cristóbal Martínez and Kade Twist, indigenous artists with deep roots in the Tesuque Pueblo of New Mexico and Arizona and made up of Raven Chacon, To be Latino is, in many cases, to have descended from both the colonizer and the colonized, to be between languages or to mourn the loss of a language. To be Latino is, in many cases, to have descended from both the colonizer and the colonized, to be between languages or to mourn the loss of a language. People who identify as Latino might be recent arrivals to the United States, or might have a centuries-long history with land now known as the United States. Latino culture isn’t monolithic. There isn’t a single artistic or political philosophy. And there certainly isn’t one story, one Latino identity. Primarily, however, Latino art is American art, and much like feminist art in the 1970s, or queer art in the 1980s, Latino art in 2017 says as much about the country at large as it does about any single group; the work is both predictive of and in response to the current political moment.

The militarization of the border and America’s shifting immigration policies have become recurring touchstones among Latino artists. Postmodernity, an art collective based in New Mexico and Arizona and made up of Beto Rivera, Cristóbal Martínez and Kade Twist, indigenous artists with deep roots in the Tesuque Pueblo of New Mexico and Arizona and made up of Raven Chacon, To be Latino is, in many cases, to have descended from both the colonizer and the colonized, to be between languages or to mourn the loss of a language. To be Latino is, in many cases, to have descended from both the colonizer and the colonized, to be between languages or to mourn the loss of a language. People who identify as Latino might be recent arrivals to the United States, or might have a centuries-long history with land now known as the United States. Latino culture isn’t monolithic. There isn’t a single artistic or political philosophy. And there certainly isn’t one story, one Latino identity. Primarily, however, Latino art is American art, and much like feminist art in the 1970s, or queer art in the 1980s, Latino art in 2017 says as much about the country at large as it does about any single group; the work is both predictive of and in response to the current political moment.

The militarization of the border and America’s shifting immigration policies have become recurring touchstones among Latino artists. Postmodernity, an art collective based in New Mexico and Arizona and made up of Beto Rivera, Cristóbal Martínez and Kade Twist, indigenous artists with deep roots in the Tesuque Pueblo of New Mexico and Arizona and made up of Raven Chacon, To be Latino is, in many cases, to have descended from both the colonizer and the colonized, to be between languages or to mourn the loss of a language. To be Latino is, in many cases, to have descended from both the colonizer and the colonized, to be between languages or to mourn the loss of a language. People who identify as Latino might be recent arrivals to the United States, or might have a centuries-long history with land now known as the United States. Latino culture isn’t monolithic. There isn’t a single artistic or political philosophy. And there certainly isn’t one story, one Latino identity. Primarily, however, Latino art is American art, and much like feminist art in the 1970s, or queer art in the 1980s, Latino art in 2017 says as much about the country at large as it does about any single group; the work is both predictive of and in response to the current political moment.

The militarization of the border and America’s shifting immigration policies have become recurring touchstones among Latino artists. Postmodernity, an art collective based in New Mexico and Arizona and made up of Beto Rivera, Cristóbal Martínez and Kade Twist, indigenous artists with deep roots in the Tesuque Pueblo of New Mexico and Arizona and made up of Raven Chacon, To be Latino is, in many cases, to have descended from both the colonizer and the colonized, to be between languages or to mourn the loss of a language. To be Latino is, in many cases, to have descended from both the colonizer and the colonized, to be between languages or to mourn the loss of a language. People who identify as Latino might be recent arrivals to the United States, or might have a centuries-long history with land now known as the United States. Latino culture isn’t monolithic. There isn’t a single artistic or political philosophy. And there certainly isn’t one story, one Latino identity. Primarily, however, Latino art is American art, and much like feminist art in the 1970s, or queer art in the 1980s, Latino art in 2017 says as much about the country at large as it does about any single group; the work is both predictive of and in response to the current political moment.