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Alexander Abdelilah, "Building Destruction with Damián Ortega," *Double Magazine*, April 2019

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Building Destruction with Damián Ortega

Interview by [ALEXANDER ABDELILAH](#).

The sheer scale of migrant caravans that are currently travelling across the American continent from south to north didn't catch everyone by surprise. Thanks to his experience as a press cartoonist and his education in a far-left leaning family, Damián Ortega has always been very clear-headed about the unbalance that prevails on his continent and in his homeland, Mexico. Between the ages of twenty and twenty-four, his participation in the "Taller de los Viernes" (the "Friday workshops") by Gabriel Orozco, alongside other young avant-garde Mexican artists, immediately connected him to radicalism. In response to the disintegration of certain social structures in his country and beyond, which compels thousands of families into exile, Damián Ortega deconstructs seemingly banal objects. As he hangs each component of the object from a wire, he brings to light the assembling process, highlights the mechanisms. For instance, with the

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Volkswagen Beetle reappropriated by Ortega, it's no longer the curved hood but the steering column that steals the spotlight, a piece that is usually invisible has become as threatening as it is a target. With Ortega, is truly not an

ing as a
nears its
Damián
sculpture
end per se.

COURTESY OF THE ARTIST AND GLADSTONE GALLERY.



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Alexander Abdellilah Your assistant told me you might not hear your phone ringing because you were working with heavy tools. What are you working on?

Damián Ortega Right now, I am doing a stone piece in my studio, here in the south of Mexico City. It's inspired by a nightmare I had a few years ago, when I was in the hospital. I never worked on a dream or a nightmare before, because I always thought it was too kitsch, post-surrealistic in a way. But the image was so powerful that I decided to start working on it. It was about a structure through which I was understanding and seeing everything. Like a net, or a computer rendering. The doctors in the hospital I was staying at had to implant a net into my belly, to cure a hernia I had. My dream was that I had to discover the grid in order to understand every object. Right now, I'm working with geometric patterns to create objects.

Alexander When will these nightmare-based pieces be shown?

Damián We have finished six of them already. They will be exhibited in April at the Gladstone Gallery, in New York.

Alexander Have the migrant caravans which are crossing Latin America and Mexico had an impact on your work?

Damián It's a sad and complex situation:

the reaction in Mexico was difficult, but it was even worse in the US, where Trump said he would welcome the migrants with bullets. I speak Spanish too, so I can understand their human situation more easily. Those people just need a job and some security. I asked myself how I can use the residue that I produce while creating a piece. I like the idea of producing an object with the waste that I'm producing while creating my modernistic buildings out of stone. So these buildings will have their own shadow. I want to play with this dust because it is important too. It's about how capitalism shows only one side, for people who have money. But where is the place for those who don't have any? I saw a wonderful cartoon recently: it showed a factory on which "neoliberalism" was written, and the products coming out of it were migrants. I also remember a piece I created a few years ago: it was a white plinth that looked like a stereotypical building. I put a light on one side, and thousands of little cubes on the shadowy side that looked like a kind of favela. The title was *Dark Side*. The United States are our neighbor and many of our ideas are influenced by them. But I come from a family that was very skeptical towards the US and I grew up with that skepticism. It

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took me years and years to learn English, because in a way it was the language of the enemy! (laughs)

Alexander In a filmed portrait of you produced by an American channel, you are described as “Mexican, yet globally resonant”. As if both concepts should be mutually exclusive. Mexico is often seen in the context of its relation to the US, rarely on its own, like an independent country.

Damián It was a surprise for everyone to see that a group of Mexican artists had an influence in the USA. My generation started in a local context and then jumped into a more global setting. Before that happened, in the eyes of the world, Mexico was a provider of cheap labor. Now, Mexican culture is expanding and is present in Europe and in the US: Alfonso Cuarón is enjoying huge success with his film *Roma*, Gabriel Orozco has become a major cultural figure, even in Europe... It's a new Mexican identity that I like a lot.

Alexander How would you define this new Mexican identity?

Damián The boys from Mexico are people who were never modeled by official culture. They were all a little bit anarchistic, outsiders, foreigners. Like Abraham Cruzvillegas, who is now teaching in France: he had to fight against a lot of

discrimination in Mexico! Another example is Gabriel Orozco, who was the son of a well-known communist.

Alexander You often cite the muralist Diego Rivera as an influence. One of his murals is entitled *Man, Controller of the Universe*. Was your piece *Controller of the Universe*, a cloud of used and rusty tools hanging in the air, a homage?

Damián It was, but also a caricature. Rivera used this title for a very heroic piece, showing the human of the future, a socialist who controls science, technique and knowledge. My piece makes fun of that notion of control. Reality always creates accidents, control is a utopia. I like muralism because it helped me understand that a painting could be integrated into the surrounding architecture, the history, the society, the lights and the specific conditions of the place in which it is shown. In Mexico, every national building, such as the National Palace or the Anthropology Museum, has its own mural.

Alexander You are known for deconstructing everyday objects. Is it also a way of highlighting the role of the invisible people who make up our societies, such as migrant workers?

Damián The beautiful thing about art is that people are free to interpret it as they

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PHOTOGRAPHY BY NADJA MASSUN.

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want. It's better to keep it open for the audience, I don't want to control what people think about it. You should never assume that the artist knows everything about his work. Most of the time, the pieces turn out to be more intelligent than the artist. They will probably be there longer than him, and their numerous encounters will enrich them. For us artists, it's a process of learning about our own work. We have to be more modest, receptive and curious. I always produce pieces with an idea in mind, but I know I will learn a lot about it after the piece is done, or during the process of production.

Alexander I read a piece in a famous design magazine about Dyson's new offices in London. In the ground floor boardroom, there are "exploded' Dysons, Damián Ortega-style," hanging on the walls. Do you consider the fact that

a brand copies your work to decorate its offices an achievement or is it worrying to you?



Damián People sometimes ask me to produce advertising with exploded objects and I decline. In the end, they do it anyway. The question is: does it make sense to sue? I don't think so. When artists' work goes back into the culture, I think it's fantastic. People in publicity are really into arts and it's not easy to stop them, it's more of a dialogue. I guess it's also part of the success of one's work! Maybe one day I will show my exploded car (*Cosmic Thing*), and people

will tell me: "Oh, it's like in that office in London!" (laughs)