

GLADSTONE GALLERY

“Kate Bush on Damian Ortega”, Artforum, January 2003

KATE BUSH ON DAMIAN ORTEGA

One of a coterie grouped around Mexico City's Galería Kurimanzutto, Damián Ortega conceives his artworks not as discrete, rarefied objects but rather as forms of action combining material with thought. The young Mexican artist leaped onto the international stage this fall with “Cosmic Thing”, a solo exhibition at the Institute of Contemporary Art, Philadelphia, which followed contributions in 2001 to a number of notable group shows, like “Squatters #1” at Witte de With, Rotterdam, and the Museu de Arte Contemporanea de Serralves, Porto, and “Animations” at P.S.1 Contemporary Art Center in New York. If you are traveling south this winter, check him out (through March 1) at “The Air Is Blue”, Hans-Ulrich Obrist's curatorial intervention in the Casa Barragán, Mexico City.

Ortega's works touch on questions of social space and environmentalism, on postindustrialization and urban modernity. The formal register is one of understated, poetic constructivism and as such can be related to a long Latin American sculptural tradition, as exemplified by the Neo-concretists. Ortega, though, invests the mode with his own deft humor: A proposition for a new kind of building technique, for example, which utilizes the ubiquitous tortilla as a cheap, practical material, conjures an object of delicate, delicious beauty (Tortilla Construction Modules, 1998).

Now thirty-five years old, Ortega left school at sixteen to pursue a career as a political cartoonist in the left-wing press but in the last few years has concentrated his observations on the contemporary world into sculptural form. Comparisons with friend and compatriot Gabriel Orozco have been made, and it's hard to avoid viewing *Cosmic Thing*, 2002, Ortega's most ambitious sculpture to date, in part as a witty riposte to Orozco's famous *La DS*, 1993. Where Orozco chose the gleaming allure of the eternally desirable Citroen, Ortega opts for the humble (classic) VW Beetle, a car appreciated more for its endurance than for its style. Driven by millions of Mexicans and now manufactured solely on the edges of Mexico City (the US halted imports in 1977), it's a car laden with national identity.

Originally a product of Nazi engineering, the “people's car” has fulfilled its democratic promise on Mexican soil. It may be technologically outmoded, but it still stands for the triumph of pragmatic New World economics over profligate consumer culture, with its endless cycles of novelty and obsolescence. Ortega takes the Beetle, disassembles it part by part, component by component, and recomposes it in space, so that it hangs in the air, a cross between a three-dimensional rendition of a mechanic's instruction manual and an entomological anatomy exercise. Where Orozco operated surgical slicing and suturing the “goddess's” chassis, Ortega the pathologist, dissecting and analyzing the body of the Bug in space. Where Orozco's DS is all sleek reductive and potential motion, Ortega's Beetle is as static as pre-Columbian sculpture and—at least viewed frontal with its beak bonnet

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and popping, vacant eyes, slightly reminiscent of those mythical hybrid creatures sculpted on Mayan Temples in Teotihuacán or Yucatán.

Mexican’s culture dexterity in adapting certain international modernism’s design ideal to local art practical need –as symbolized by the success of the VW–also finds, expression in Ortega’s continuing series of sculptures composed of toy-scaled architectures. In *Acción* (Action), 2002, he constructed –from the same plastic used in Latin America’s first social housing –a mini-modernist housing project and landscaped it with typical Mexican houseplants, cactus and aloe. The modular buildings spell out the word *acción*, while the complex’s surrounding basketball courts and swimming pools form the word *hacer* (to do): This conflation of static architecture and active verb points to a dynamism in inherent tropical modernity’s domestication of modernism’s utopian plan.