

GLADSTONE GALLERY

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Meet the Beetles

by Kristin Friedrich

Captain Ahab chased a white whale through oceans around the world; Mexican artist *Damián Ortega* squared off against a white car on Lower Grand Avenue. It was the latter saga, also called "Moby Dick," that inspired MOCA and REDCAT to collaborate on an art presentation for the first time. This week both institutions debut work from Ortega - a trilogy dedicated to the Volkswagen Beetle.

MOCA Associate Curator *Alma Ruiz* had been following Ortega's work since 1994, and saw a piece called "Cosmic Thing" hanging from the ceiling of the Institute of Contemporary Art at the University of Pennsylvania in 2002. The work is an intricately disassembled Beetle, suspended and looking like it exploded outward.

For Ortega, the car means a lot of things. In 1967, Volkswagen opened a factory in Puebla, Mexico, and the jobs that were created allowed numerous workers to buy their first cars. Many of them purchased Beetles, and today the car is much more common in Mexico than in the United States. The artist, who trained as a political cartoonist, saw the car as a symbol of Westernization and class mobility.

"I realized he had graduated to a different level," Ruiz said. "That his work was turning into something that was in a way, more a universal interest, and not as localized."

There was a whimsical side too. The little Beetle doesn't have the hard angles of most cars. It has a sort of quixotic spirit, in other words, which also interested Ortega.

MOCA bought the work for its permanent collection, then promptly sent it off after it was requested at the 2003 Venice Biennale. When it returned, Ruiz learned that the Gallery at REDCAT had an Ortega show in the works. REDCAT Director and curator *Eungie Joo* soon asked if the MOCA piece could be installed at the same time as the REDCAT show.

Joo and assistant curator *Clara Kim* had taken a trip to Mexico City in early 2004. They saw videos of Ortega tugging a white Beetle around by a rope, and invited him to do the same in L.A.

Thus, on June 3 of this year, MOCA and REDCAT combined forces to close off lower Grand Avenue late at night. There, Ortega faced off against a VW Beetle once again. In between the loading docks of both institutions, there were three circles painted on the street: one containing the car, one containing Ortega, and one containing a three-piece band playing Led Zeppelin's "Moby Dick."

The work, which was filmed and also titled "Moby Dick," depicts the physical struggle between artist and machine. It's a sort of a tug-of-war in which Ortega attempts to control the Beetle with a series of ropes and pulleys.

"The car starts to look like a trapped animal, like there was an urban hunt going on," *Joo* said.

The third part of the trilogy, also shown at REDCAT, is "Beetle '83, Escarabajo." In this video, told from the Beetle's point of view, the car comes out of the factory, goes to the city, and at the end of its life decides to head back to its birthplace, Puebla. At the close of the film, the Beetle is buried in a field, with four wheels sticking out of the dirt.

"It refers to the myth of the hero's return home," Ruiz said.

"There's something very tender about this action," *Joo* added, "even with the absurd humor running through."

MOCA Grand Avenue is at 250 S. Grand Ave., (213) 626-6222 or moca.org. REDCAT is at 631 W. Second St., (213) 237-2800 or redcat.org.

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