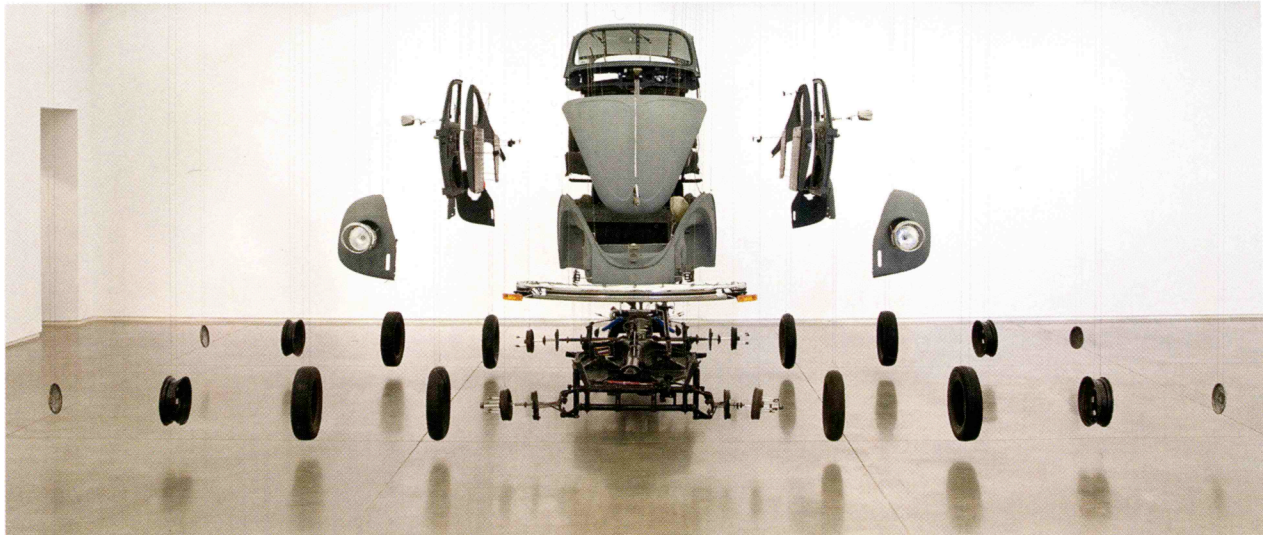


GLADSTONE GALLERY

Garza, Evan J., "Damián Ortega, Boston," *Art Papers*, November/December 2009



ABOVE: Damián Ortega, *Cosmic Thing*, 2002, disassembled 1989 Volkswagen Beetle, 265 x 276 x 296 inches (collection of The Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles, purchased with funds provided by Eugenio López and the Jumex Fund for Contemporary Latin American Art)

DAMIÁN ORTEGA BOSTON

Given the current post-medium climate—where multi-disciplinary artists reign supreme in both the marketplace and conceptual fortitude—the success of contemporary practitioners is not contingent on the ability of one's hand. Instead it is the connections, even the disconnections, one makes that separate the banal from the unbelievable. Many artists draw influence from their surroundings, and Mexico City—which has seen a meteoric rise to art mecca status recently—is the home of several artists now working abroad whose work is composed of crystal-clear cultural appropriations, including Gabriel Kuri, Abraham Cruzvillegas, and Damián Ortega, all mentored by Gabriel Orozco. *Do It Yourself*, the first museum retrospective of Mexican-born Berlin-based Ortega, not only masterfully uses Mexico as a medium but also reveals that the grandest of statements can be said with incredibly modest means [Institute of Contemporary Art/Boston (ICA); September 18, 2009—January 18, 2010].

It would be misleading to say that “folkloricized” works of art are anachronistic, as Ortega's exhibition at the ICA clearly demonstrates. Curated by Jessica Morgan, curator of contemporary art at the Tate Modern, and organized by ICA associate curator Randi Hopkins, the show features works from the last fifteen years, often made from found objects like used furniture, oil barrels, and even tortillas, and exhibited in a giant gallery where unforeseen connections are demonstrated between unlikely pairings. In each work, however, Ortega appears to reveal something we might have already known, presented or approached in a way we did not anticipate. *120 Days*, 2002, features a hundred and twenty variations of the classic Coca-Cola glass bottle, a symbol of Mexican consumerism, scattered atop a shelf along the gallery's north wall. Based on a series of drawings not

shown here, the bottles are recognizable at first—the standard hourglass figure, as familiar as that of a woman. They become increasingly foreign until they are only identifiable as pieces of glass.

Ortega's fascination with the material qualities of things is matched only by his eagerness to transform them. Even more apparent here is his inclination to take things apart. *Liquid Center*, 1997, a thirty-one-minute video, documents the artist gradually slicing open a golf ball, unexpectedly revealing its liquid contents. A nearby table anchored to the floor by jagged rocks documents the effects of inertia on a spinning tank of water by way of a live video projection on an adjacent wall. Near an architectural grid of interlocking tortillas is an ear of corn with a number inscribed on each individual kernel—a witty remark on the Mexican “significance” of maíz. *Cosmic Thing*, 2002, a disassembled 1989 Volkswagen Beetle, most clearly demonstrates Ortega's insistence in attributing value to the most mundane things. Suspended from the ceiling and expanding outwards, as if it were a three-dimensional cross-section of itself, it reveals individual parts layer by layer. The sheer scale and beauty of the hanging sculpture is staggering. The most common car in Mexico—designed by VW for the Third Reich to be produced on the cheap—Ortega's Beetle eloquently reveals that a single thing, be it a car or a culture, is made up of several pieces which require meticulous study.

While Ortega's materials might suggest an ethnocentric focus, his conceptual framework is highly universal. Unconcerned with literal cultural interpretations or historicized tropes of “Mexicanismo,” Ortega skillfully portrays himself as a kind of art scientist: curious, meticulous, and eager to reveal any and all hidden truths.

—Evan J. Garza