

# GLADSTONE GALLERY

Mack, Joshua, "Mexico City," *Art Review*, Summer 2011

## MEXICO CITY

Alternately energised and weighed upon by the layers of modern and ancient central to **Mexico City**'s identity, the contemporary art scene here holds myriad perspectives in productive tension.

**THE TEQUILA APPEARS ON THE DRINKS CART** just after noon, as the 9am Aeroméxico flight from New York approaches the vast mountain basin which was once Tenochtitlan, the Aztec capital, and is now the heaving sprawl of Mexico City. The lady next to me takes a light beer; I stick with Diet Coke, knowing too well the seductions of floating through the city below in a haze. Even easier is succumbing to the energy – and exotic aura – which comes from Mexico's cultural layering: the country is the New World laid on top of the Old World over the truly Ancient World of the nation's indigenous cultures. It's the edge in Frida Kahlo, wearing her peasant dresses in her surreal self-portraits. She is both completely modern and salt of the Mexican earth, the former because she was the latter. Her intense, unibrow-crowned stare dares you to challenge either claim.

And despite the burgeoning contemporary cultural scene which had collectors from Europe, North America, South America and Puerto Rico joining homegrown accumulators at this year's edition of the Mexico City Art Fair (MACO), held in April, that tension still plays out in much of what goes on. Take, for example, the book signing for American artist Jimmie Durham, hosted for VIP fair visitors by Kurimanzutto gallery at the Museo Anahuacalli. Built by Kahlo's husband, Diego Rivera, on a lava outcrop in the south of the city, the structure is a cross between a Mayan pyramid and the Stalinist highrises that dot Moscow. Rivera's collection of pre-Hispanic art (half of it fake, according to one wag) is arrayed in tomblike galleries on the ground floor. Upstairs, under a study for a mural of Comrade Joe and the youthful Mao gazing at Frida as she receives peasant children, various collectors, curators and supposedly important people (many of whom, myself included, did not speak Spanish) listened as artist Gabriel Orozco introduced Durham's book. Written in Spanish and Nahuatl, an indigenous language which apparently lacks the verb 'to be' and a word for 'trash', the book, I gleaned, channels an ancient and enduring metaphysical belief in the inherent power of materials (the name of the museum derives from the Nahuatl word meaning 'house of energy'). It was not, however, lost on us monolingual northerners that our assumed privilege in speaking what proved, at that juncture, not to be the universal language was so much trash.

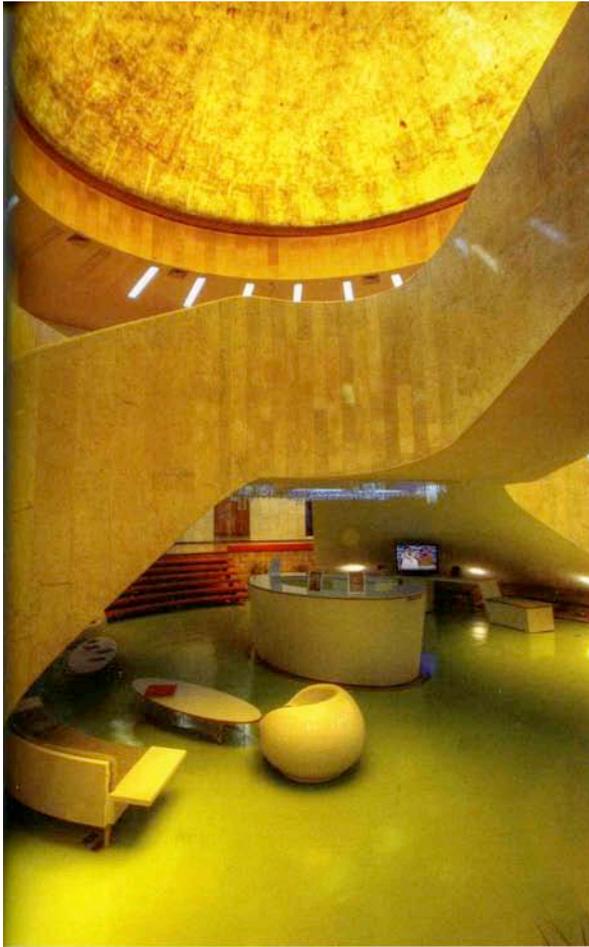
*ArtReview* pays a visit to the megacity, looking, as one artist puts it, to distinguish the Mexican from the 'Mexicanality'

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Similar issues of past and present, the Mexican and the foreign, the humble and the high, formed the themes of Damián Ortega's show at Kurimanzutto. Recapping his signature ideas – from casts of looping vacuum cleaner hoses to doormat-size plots of earth removed from Berlin, where he now lives, and transported to Mexico – the work was professional and beautiful, if obvious in its ideas of return and longing for home. Or as Carlos Amorales, another gallery artist, put it during a studio visit earlier in the week, how does one situate oneself vis-à-vis the Mexican without falling into "Mexicanity"? Ironic then that Kurimanzutto's stable, which also includes Abraham Cruzvillegas and Dr Lakra, has come to define contemporary Mexican art in the popular mind, which gets its information at art fairs and retrospectives mounted by major foreign museums.

That negotiation was also the subject of *The Visual Machine*, an exhibition at the Museo de Arte Moderno examining how culture has been used to define the nation. Founded in 1964, and housed in a barbell-shaped building in centrally located Chapultepec Park (which is also home to the Tamayo Museum, a museum of history, and the astounding collections of pre-Columbian art at the National Museum of Anthropology; go there at all costs!), the museum was positioned to show that the nation was both modern and progressive. But from the first, its ethos ping-ponged back and forth between the local and the



international. Of the two inaugural shows, one was a survey of the five great masters of twentieth-century Mexican art (Rivera, David Alfaro Siqueiros, Dr Atl, Jose Clemente Orozco and Rufinó Tamayo), the other a biennial in which an abstract painter took the prize, causing scandal at the success of a foreign, 'imperialist' aesthetic.

An adjacent show explored contemporary work that takes process, production and material as the source for the poetic and metaphysical – as opposed to the deconstruction we are used to up north. That this trend, it was carefully pointed out, draws on traditions of Mexican abstraction, suggests that style and identity have yet to be separated. Perhaps the Mexicans are as jealous of having a school as foreigners are to find one there.

If the museum is looking critically at its own past, it's also trying to open up the present. In a project space off the lobby, a small exhibition examined the local indie music scene both as an alternative to the commercial and as the generator of its own codes and rules of community. With a jukebox and a programme of performances, the show aimed to break down the traditional barrier between audience and the do-not-touch museum.

Several other spaces are also pursuing equally fresh programmes. There's El Eco, designed in the early 1950s by Mathias Goeritz, a German artist who came to Mexico after the Second World War. Marrying a modernist faith in form and material with an empathy for ancient and indigenous cosmology, he conceived El Eco – remember Anahuacalli, the 'house of energy' – as a place where art and architecture could lead the visitor to emotional transcendence. In that spirit, El Eco now



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sponsors residencies, small exhibitions, concerts and an annual competition for young architects. It's also one of the five participants in the New York-based New Museum's 'Museum as Hub' initiative.

El Eco operates under the umbrella of UNAM, the national university, which is also responsible for MUAC, a museum on its campus in the south of the city. Described online as the 'largest public institution in Mexico to accommodate a collection of national and international contemporary art', the stunning new glass and cement building was hosting *Plegaria Muda* (2008–10), an installation by Doris Salcedo, and a show by Thai filmmaker Apichatpong Weerasethakul, whose mix of urban culture and the fragments of traditional cultures resonates with local circumstances.

If the vestiges of 'Mexicanity' float through much of above, there's a younger generation of dealers establishing a more integrated network with edgier practices abroad. Emblematic of this engagement was the show organised by Labor, a gallery in the Roma neighbourhood, of videos and extensive documentary material by Raphael Montañez Ortiz, an American artist and educator who was also the founding director of El Museo del Barrio in New York. Opened by Pamela Echeverría, who worked at the Museo de Arte Carrillo Gil and OMR, one of the stodgier contemporary galleries in the city, Labor maintains an art library available for use by appointment and runs an active programme of performances, conferences and reading groups, the current one focusing on Karl Marx.

In nearby Condesa, House of Gaga (named after the voguing families featured in the 1990 documentary film *Paris Is Burning*; Gaga has no meaning in Spanish) developed from a nonprofit residency, curatorial and publishing programme called Perros Negros. Its ethos is collaborative, hip and a bit rough around the edges in a Lower East Side storefront kind of way. But with connections to New York galleries Greene Naftali and Reena Spaulings, and shows by Claire Fontaine, Josef Strau and Alex Hubbard to the venue's credit, the boys who run the space have positioned themselves strategically vis-à-vis innovative trends abroad. Finally there is Proyectos Monclova, a few blocks from



Kurimanzutto, which featured an exhibition by Christian Jankowski based on a public project in Mexico City, and a group show, organised by San Francisco-based curators Chris Fitzpatrick and Post Brothers, of young artists who ply the space between concept, information and the object as a bearer of meaning.

For all the vigour of the new, epiphany struck me at the Luis Barragán-designed Casa Prieto López, a private residence opened one morning for members of MACO's collectors programme. The rooms are installed with artworks that create sightlines across the interlocking cubes of space, from a pre-Columbian ceramic, to colonial santos figures washed by daylight, to a gold orb by Mathias Goeritz, which distils the world to a perfect sphere and looks back to the pre-Hispanic reverence for the force of the natural world. A choreographed architectural paean to Mexico's history and people, it induced the sense of floating through time and space. Even to the hardened atheist, it offered the message that God is light and time is God and beauty is man's aspiration towards the divine. ❧

### IMAGES (IN ORDER OF APPEARANCE)

Two views (exterior and interior) of *Museo de Arte Moderno*.  
Courtesy Museo de Arte Moderno, Mexico City

Damián Ortega, *The Stranger*, 2011, HD video,  
colour, sound (audio stereo).  
58 min 16 sec. Courtesy the artist and Kurimanzutto, Mexico City

Exterior view of *Museo Tamayo*. Photo: Gerardo Pena.  
Courtesy Museo Tamayo, Mexico City

Doris Salcedo, *Plegaria Muda* (96 of 166 pieces).  
2008–10, wood, mineral compound, cement.  
Courtesy the artist, Alexander and Bonin, New York, and White Cube, London

Apichatpong Weerasethakul, *Primitive*, 2009,  
two-channel video, sound, 29 min 35 sec

