

# GLADSTONE GALLERY

Smee, Sebastian, "The sum of its parts," The Boston Globe, September 20, 2009

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ART REVIEW

## The sum of its parts

The Boston Globe

With a wry eye, Damián Ortega deconstructs the inherent obsolescence behind the technological progress that dominates our lives



Sebastian Smee tours ICA Boston's new Damian Ortega show

By Sebastian Smee

Globe Staff / September 20, 2009

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For Damián Ortega, ideas and things, far from being connected by logic, have a deeper, unaccountable relationship, amounting to a kind of magic act. It's a

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relationship that's destructive one minute and creative the next, but it's never less than funny.



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- **Putting together (sort of) a car taken apart**

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**DAMIÁN ORTEGA**  
: Do It Yourself

At: Institute of Contemporary Art,  
through Jan. 18. 617-478-3100,  
[www.icaboston.org](http://www.icaboston.org)

Ortega's new show at the Institute of Contemporary Art - a survey of 19 of his sardonic, mind-teasing works - has the clarity and transparency of positivism (what you see is what you get; everything adds up). It also attests to a love of science and systems. But in various ways - via sculpture, video, photography, and several endearingly klutzy installations resembling backyard experiments - it doubles as a study in entropy and the fallibility of those systems.

Take a work like "Cosmic Thing," the exhibit's star turn. The conceit is simple: It's a car manual diagram brought to life. Ortega has taken a haggard-looking Volkswagen Beetle, in battleship gray, and pulled it apart, so that every detachable component, from the door locks to the inner tubes, has been separated and extended in space along horizontal or vertical axes. The parts have been suspended from the ceiling, the logic of their positioning perfectly maintained.

But the effect, like a good joke, turns logic back on itself. What we're used to seeing in two dimensions (a diagram) suddenly appears to us, impossibly, in three. The humble Beetle, a car that's all but ubiquitous in Ortega's native Mexico, now looms over us, dwarfing us like a specter from a planet where gravity doesn't apply. And yet paradoxically, it's porous, inviting: We can walk *through* it (just watch your head!).

The work has a kind of kinetic energy, like a frozen explosion. (It's not by accident that the other kind of diagram it suggests is that of an atom.) And one

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final irony: To the extent that car manual diagrams connect with reality, it's to a shiny new, functional reality - items hot off the assembly line. But if Ortega's Beetle is hot off anything, it's a junk heap. It's two decades old. The parts are rusting. A passenger seat is missing.

Thus, the iconic Volkswagen - the German "people's car" notoriously proposed by Hitler and ultimately exported successfully all over the world - is revealed for what it is, an idea with its own use-by date. Of course, planned obsolescence is nothing new in industrial production. But I take Ortega to be suggesting that obsolescence *inheres* in things, whether it's planned or not. Systems break down. Logic eats itself. Plans disintegrate.

Ortega isn't lamenting all this. His work is an attempt to think it through. One of the things he finds in the ensuing flux is a tremendous raw energy. [Continued...](#)

**Page 2 of 2** -- The works I liked best here take as their starting point simple units of construction, like bricks, echoing Ortega's conviction that raw, unyoked matter has a special potential.



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A room adjacent to the main gallery, for instance, has been given over to a series of nine films, screened concurrently by whirring and clicking old school projectors. Each film shows, on a loop, carefully placed lines of bricks tumbling like dominoes. One of them, tumbling in a spiral shape, inevitably calls to mind the work of Robert Smithson, whose swooning, ecstatic notion of entropy was most famously expressed in his earthwork "Spiral Jetty."

Another piece, placed in a corridor that faces out onto Boston Harbor, is made from polished stainless steel. It's a series of cube-shaped modules, each one formed by eight smaller cubes connected by hinges, so they can be folded into different

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configurations. Backed by a long mirror, the modules reflect the sea and sky outside, as well as viewers inside. They combine "Do It Yourself" (the show's title) with "Look at Yourself" and "Look at the World."

But I especially liked a series of photographs called "Resting Matter (Brazil)." The photographs show stacked piles of bricks outside houses in that country. The piles, apparently a common sight in Brazil, are kept for later use by homeowners who may want to add extensions. Charmingly, each pile has its own individual shape, and each shape suggests the unique logic (or lack thereof) of its maker.

Ortega thinks of them, he writes on the wall label, as "an accumulation of resting energy," "a drowsy battery."

A former political cartoonist, Ortega is used to regarding economic injustices, political upheaval, and failed systems with a wry, skeptical eye. One work here, a trio of rotating oil barrels stacked on top of one another at precarious angles, has the scientific-sounding title "False Movement (Stability and Economic Growth)." Its point, like the best editorial cartoons, is self-explanatory.

Another work, "América New Order," is displayed near the disintegrating Beetle. It shows a wall of bricks with a jumbled car battery logo painted on them. A nearby diagram demonstrates how Ortega painted the logo, "América," then numbered the bricks on the other side from top left to bottom right. Without breaking the numerical order, he proceeded to rearrange them in different sequences (for instance, starting with 1 at the bottom right instead of the top left). Each shift in the sequencing, logical in itself, splintered the image on the reverse side, making it all but unrecognizable. New order to disorder.

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"Autoconstruction, Bridges and Dams: Bridge" is another work that combines the idea of technological progress and order with ordinary, obsolete things - in this case, a handful of old chairs crying out for retirement. Roped together, the result has an endearingly homemade, provisional air: One slipped knot, you fear, could cause the whole thing to tumble. But it also, deftly, calls to mind the stop-motion photography pioneered, in a spirit of scientific positivism, by Eadweard Muybridge in the 19th century. Looking at it, we can imagine a single chair rotating in an arc through space.

There's something almost teasingly simple about much of Ortega's work. Some may feel offended, or patronized, by the obviousness of his conceits. But I actually prefer his simpler ideas, which have an ineffable elegance, to his more elaborate works, which feel overwrought. "120 Days," in particular - a row of hand-blown variations on the Coke bottle inspired by the Marquis de Sade's "120 Days of Sodom" and executed by professional glass blowers - seems to contradict the show's "do it yourself" spirit.

Two other small works extend Ortega's interest in classification, construction, and disintegration while alluding neatly to his Mexican heritage (he's based these days in Berlin). One is a small sculpture made from tortillas toasted and slotted together like a natty piece of modernist design or a children's toy.

The other, "Classified Cob," is a desiccated corn cob, each of its kernels inscribed with a number, from one into the double hundreds. As with the Beetle, the corn is past its prime. Several of its kernels have fallen off. It's another succinct expression of order in the process of breakdown.

There may be more makeshift poetry than conceptual rigor to Ortega's fancies. But that's fine. His interest in science is deep and sincere, but it's combined with a keen awareness of the limits of the systems of thinking that dominate our lives. His work has a built-in humility that's part and parcel of its wit and sympathy.