

GLADSTONE GALLERY

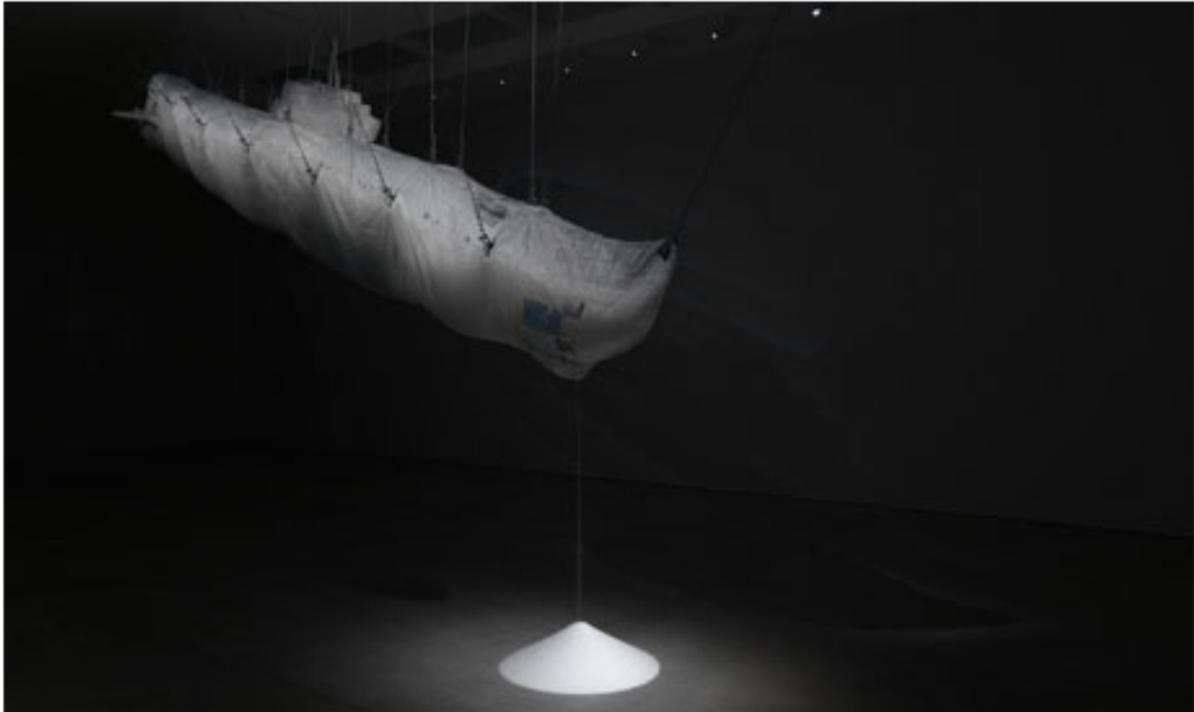
Sherwin, Skye, "Artist of the week 204: Damian Ortega," *The Guardian*, August 23, 2012.

Artist of the week 204: Damián Ortega

This Mexican artist transforms everyday finds, from Coke bottles to corn on the cob, into things of wonder

Skye Sherwin

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'Salt pours like an hourglass from a huge submarine made of industrial food sacks' ... Damián Ortega's *Hollow/Stuffed: market law* (2012). Photograph: White Cube/Todd-White Art Photography/Damián Ortega

Damián Ortega has a little kid's urge to take things apart and figure out how they tick. For **Cosmic Thing**, the work that made the Mexican artist's name when it dazzled visitors to the 2003 Venice Biennale, he simply dismantled a VW Beetle – from the tongue-like curve of its bonnet to the liquorice Os of its wheels. Hanging from the ceiling, as if the entire thing had spontaneously leapt apart into a nuts-and-bolts constellation, the "people's car" became a thing of wonder.

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Items you find around the house and on the street – piles of bricks, tortillas, oil drums, rotting fruit – are among his favourite materials. His work **Classified Cob**, where each shrivelled kernel on a cob of sweetcorn has been numbered, makes an old vegetable seem quite marvellous. **120 Days**, created with the aid of Venetian glassblowers, transforms Coke bottles into curvaceous stems that look like sex toys worthy of the Marquis de Sade, whose *120 Days of Sodom* is referenced in the title.

Born in 1967, Ortega is a frontrunner of the generation that's emerged in the wake of Mexican artists like his former teacher, **Gabriel Orozco**, or **Francis Alys**. As with his forebears, he makes playful use of everyday finds, while opening a window on to political and economic subtexts. In Mexico – where the **German VW Beetle** has been made, marketed and a major hit – the car is a charged icon of western cultural imposition.

Secret histories of materials course through Ortega's current London show, *Traces of Gravity*, where salt is the connecting thread. A thin line of it runs like a coke hit across Congo River, a landscape of black tyres that calls to mind the infamous rubber trade that quickened the pace of colonial atrocities in the **Congo**, and which inspired Joseph Conrad's novel *Heart of Darkness*. Elsewhere, it pours like an hourglass from a huge submarine made out of industrial food sacks, suspended from the ceiling in a darkened space. The appearance of salt in photography is more gentle: invoked by the shadow of a prone bicycle on a bed of salt, where the bike's spinning wheel creates a lo-fi moving image that looks back to the magic lantern shows that predated cinema.

As always, Ortega's raw materials suggest much more than the sum of their parts.

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Why we like him: For his film series *9 Types of Terrain*, where children's games align with war games. **Rows of standing bricks fall like dominoes**, arranged in formations that echo the nine types of battlefield Sun Tzu outlined in **The Art of War**. The bricks might be people, homes, or civilisations, falling and springing back to life as the films begin again and again.

Power of the pen: Ortega started out as a political cartoonist.

Where can I see him? At **White Cube** to 8 September.