

GLADSTONE GALLERY

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A VISIT WITH DAMIÁN ORTEGA

BY E. C. GOGOLAK



Toward the end of an extremely narrow street in Tlalpan, a district on the southern edge of Mexico City, there is a block full of dentists' offices marked by signs depicting dental picks and teeth. It's a fitting place for Damián Ortega's studio. He is a master of the tool, an artist of the everyday, an expert *bricoleur*. On a recent Friday, Ortega, who is forty-seven, invited me into his studio's tool room. "I've had some of these for years," he said. "I'm a collector." Drawing upon the politics of daily life, Ortega has become a fixture in the international art world for his striking deconstruction of the ordinary, a poetics of the quotidian that is at once thoroughly Mexican and globally resonant.



The artist Damian Ortega, at the Barbican Centre, in London.

PHOTOGRAPH BY FRANTZESCO KANGARIS/EYEVINE/REDUX

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Nearby was a room whose ceiling was dotted with colored pegs forming concentric circles—this is where Ortega makes his objects float. Ortega rose to fame thanks to his gravity-defying installations, the most recent of which, “*Cosmogonía doméstica*” (Domestic Cosmogony), appeared outside of Mexico City’s new Museo Jumex this year. It is situated directly in front of the Museo Soumaya, which is also new—a shimmering, startling structure designed by Fernando Romero and commissioned by the billionaire Carlos Slim. “My reaction,” Ortega told me, “was to bring the eyes down, to focus on the human scale.” He built a domestic scene: the contents of a commonplace kitchen—plates, bowls, teapots, utensils—spun above a wooden table. Everything rotated slowly, half floating, around five concentric circles built into the floor. The piece, sandwiched between the new icons of Mexico’s wealth (the Jumex is the home of the art collection of Eugenio López Alonso, the Jumex juice heir), was classic Ortega: a subtle play on the routine amid bureaucracy, capital, poverty, and the megalopolis. The installation, he told me, “is no more than the atmosphere of *la vida diaria*,” he said, or everyday life—with a twist. Chairs balanced on one leg; vegetables were suspended in mid-air. Naturally, there was something cartoonish about it.

When Ortega was sixteen, he dropped out of school to become a political cartoonist. The mid- to late nineteen-eighties were a dark time in Mexico City. A devastating earthquake in 1985 killed an estimated ten thousand people in the city and exposed deep government corruption. It was followed by six years under Carlos Salinas de Gortari, who was Mexico’s most reviled president since Porfirio Díaz. Ortega was working for magazines and newspapers, satirizing political speeches and government missteps. He saw himself following in the footsteps of the nineteenth and early twentieth-century Mexican printmaker José Guadalupe Posada, whose influence is clear in the murals of Diego Rivera and José Clemente Orozco. “It was my wish was to be a muralist, like the famous paintings in Mexico.” Instead, he saw the spirit of the muralists, the icons of Mexican political art, come alive on paper. The mural, he said, “comes into the format of the caricature, the print.”

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Meanwhile, Ortega was looking for a way to continue his education. His brother knew Gabriel Orozco, today Mexico's best-known living artist, who had just moved back from Madrid. They met in Tlalpan, just a few blocks away from Ortega's current studio. And there it began. Every Friday, Ortega, along with Jerónimo López Ramírez (a.k.a. Dr Lakra), Gabriel Kuri, and Abraham Cruzvillegas, attended a self-styled art school at Orozco's house, which they called *Taller de los Viernes* (Friday Workshop). Ortega's sensibilities as a cartoonist made their way into his art work. "The cartoons turned into objects," he told me.

There Ortega first encountered "Dialogues with Marcel Duchamp," a book that shaped Ortega's formation as an artist and set the tone for his work to come. "It was like seeing behind the curtain, and then I found something that allowed me to see things from the other side—like seeing a whole new world," Ortega said. Duchamp's sense of the everyday runs throughout Ortega's work. In 1997, Ortega turned one of Duchamp's iconic readymades into "*América Letrina*" (American Latrine), a photograph of a toilet whose bowl has been sculpted to form the shapes of Central and South America. "In some ways, the sense of humor is still there," he laughed. "Or at least I try."

We sat at a table on the second floor, in a room with whitewashed walls dotted with scraps of drawings and lists stuck with cerulean electric tape. Ortega, who has floppy brown hair and whose square-rim glasses hung around his neck on a piece of wire, looked out the window. Tlalpan's rooftops, studded with greenery, stretched out in the dense city's haze. Carlos Monsiváis, a writer from Mexico City, once called the flat rooftops "the continuation of agrarian life by other means, the natural extension of the farm." Ortega's second-story patio has a plot of grass. "Our house is our language," Ortega told me later.

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Much of Ortega's work comments on housing within the mega-city. For "Tortillas Construction Module" (1998), Ortega made slots in crisply baked tortillas and fit them together to make what looks like a modernist housing tower. In "Skin" (2006-2007), he had saddle makers replicate public-housing floor plans by Le Corbusier, Oskar Hansen, and Mario Pani, whose Centre Urbano Presidente Alemán (CUPA), built in 1949, was Latin America's first social-housing project. The hides were hung from the ceiling with meat hooks. In another play on urban space, "*Acción*" (Action, 2002), Ortega used tiles similar to those that Pani used in the construction of CUPA to create a miniature modernist housing project, landscaped with cacti and Mexican houseplants. The buildings spell out the word "*acción*" and the basketball courts and swimming pools surrounding the complex spell the word "*hacer*" (to do). "I like to play with words," Ortega said. "The city is a big text." CUPA was in the middle of nowhere and now it has become the center of the city, he told me. His interpretation is a play on the promise of the city, and the promise of modernism to house those who flocked there. (Greater Mexico City's population currently stands at about 21.2 million.)

Ortega's work is political, but discreetly so. He calls it "a political discussion about how we should distribute the force or the power in the system, the complete system." Take "Cosmic Thing" (2002), which appeared at the 2003 Venice Biennale and helped launch Ortega onto the international art stage. The piece is a disassembled 1989 Volkswagen Beetle suspended in mid-air from the ceiling. It became one of the most widely reproduced images of that year's Biennale. The Beetle is a powerful symbol of the Mexican everyday—for decades it was the city's official taxi cab. Ortega went to the auto black market, bought a badly damaged Beetle, and hired two teen-aged boys to come to his studio and disassemble it. It took them an hour. "It was from this idea of splitting," Ortega said. "I like the idea of opening, to try to understand that the system is not a single piece. It's millions of pieces in each system, each with a perfect, specific function." Ortega suspended the parts by wire; they resembled dinosaur fossils on display at a natural-history museum.

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After spending seven years in Berlin, Ortega moved back to Mexico to live full-time two years ago. He returned to a different Mexico. While he was away, there had been an estimated twenty-seven thousand disappearances during President Felipe Calderón's drug war. His work is influenced by that context, but he said that the most political part of his art is the technique. "I guess my technique is a technique that belongs to underdevelopment. You recycle objects, you regenerate them and give them a new life," he told me. "I think that in my work this vulnerability and fragility are present, as well as the clumsiness."

Ortega thinks like a political cartoonist. At the end of our morning together, before we stepped out onto his patio and looked again at the rooftops of Tlalpan, he said, "I was reading a cartoon yesterday about how many things of the dirty war of the nineteen-seventies are coming back, with this situation of the forty-three missing in Guerrero." (The search for their bodies continues.) Scraps of dark velvet were drying in the sunshine on his outdoor stairs, splotted with chlorine. To me, the splottes resembled bloodstains. "Perfect," he said, holding the scraps up to the light. "Exactly like I wanted."

Correction: This post previously misidentified the designer of the Museo Soumaya.