

GLADSTONE GALLERY
Schmelz, Itala "Damian Ortega", Flash Art, October 2001



O U V E R T U R E

DAMIAN
ORTEGA

ITALA SCHMELZ

DAMIAN ORTEGA IS refining the art of political caricature. Since the epoch of Daumier and the French tribune in the 19th century, this genre has relieved social tensions through laughter, developing a critical sharpness in response to the political landscape. Ortega has inherited the potential of this genre, but he has removed the cartoon from its traditional medium of drawing, substituting a more contemporary vocabulary: Ortega chose sculpture as his political weapon, articulating his critique through the appropriation of everyday objects.

Ortega constructs his political jokes with a great sense of humor, and his sculptures often have double meanings. His pieces provoke an unexpected catharsis through the use of an intricate syntax. One example is *America Latrina* (Latrine America), in which a toilet seat is shaped as the silhouette of Latin America. The play on words, coupled with the use of domestic objects, produce a bitter laughter. Ortega also plays on stereotypes of national identity: after all, the idea that South America is the latrine of any Northern, global power is a fundament of Latin American mentality. In other words, Ortega confronts us with this historical, political and social fact without necessarily articulating an ideological position, but simply reflecting Mexican common sense: his piece is critical although skeptically and humorously distant.

Movimiento en falso (*Estabilidad y crecimiento económico*) — *False Move* (*Stability*



Clockwise from top: Tired Pickaxe, 1997; Movimiento en Falso, 1999; America Latrina, 1997; Steam Roller Car, 1991. Courtesy Kurimanzutto, Mexico City.

and Economic Growth), is one of Ortega's most recent sculptures. It consists of three oil barrels mounted over a spinning base in motion. This intrepid sculpture can also be imagined as a caricature published in a newspaper: it is an expressly critical and contemporary piece which comments upon one of the most serious problems of globalization in the new millennium — the energy crisis and its economic consequences.

Today, when we look for political art, we come upon forms of expression that are capable of interfering with pre-established orders, while often adopting the same weapons used by the system itself — an art of symbolic subversion that succeeds in opening a space between free-

dom of speech and the discourses of power. Ortega's work dwells in this battle field: it is a proof that art does not escape from reality; on the contrary, it departs from the present context. On the other hand, while taking part in the political dialogue, Ortega's work also maintains a certain precarious immediacy: as any satirist, Ortega doesn't like proclamations or magniloquence: his sculptures are modest proposals.

Damian Ortega was born in Mexico City in 1967. He lives and works in Mexico City.

Selected exhibitions: 2001: Tirana Biennale, Tirana; "Squatters," Museu Serralves, Porto/Witte de With, Rotterdam; "Animation," PS1, New York; "ARS 2001," Kiasma Museum, Helsinki; 1999: Kurimanzutto, Mexico DF; 1998: "Yesterday Begins Tomorrow," Bard College, New York; 1997: "Lines of Loss," Artist's Space, New York.