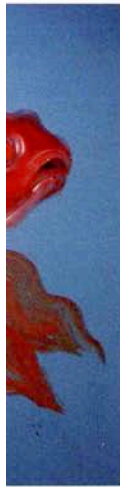


# GLADSTONE GALLERY

Jauregui, Gabriela, "Damien Ortega," *Frieze*, June, July, August 2011

MEXICO

## Damián Ortega kurimanzutto *Mexico City*



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At the centre of Damián Ortega's recent solo exhibition at kurimanzutto was a new video entitled *The Stranger* (2011). Both futuristic and archaic, this is lo-fi sci-fi at its best. Echoing scenes from Nicolas Roeg's 1976 film *The Man Who Fell to Earth*, it opens with a stranger, an alien (Ortega, dressed in a suit and with a mask reminiscent of Maria from Fritz Lang's 1927 film *Metropolis*) who has landed in a sort of steel whaling boat (a 1993 piece by Ortega entitled *Ballena*, or whale) somewhere near Tlayacapan, in the state of Morelos, an area of Mexico famed for its UFO sightings, but also for its natural beauty and strong revolutionary and indigenous roots.

The alien explores the landscape, almost like a naive land artist, making things, piling things, measuring things. There are direct allusions to the Peruvian Nazca lines (often claimed to have been made by aliens) as he carves lines into the dusty ground, but then we actually see that what the stranger draws is a mathematical Borromean knot (three interlinked circles), echoing Ortega's ongoing obsession with grouping systems.

The alien arrives in a bucolic village, where locals are almost aggressive towards him. He takes part in local festivities, and is confronted with the local folk figure of the Chinelo – a 19th-century caricature of a Spaniard – and we ask ourselves who the alien or stranger really is. As in many of Ortega's older pieces, this scene is simultaneously a socio-political critique, and an intimate self-reflection. As with the entire exhibition, it is also a questioning of identity, of longing and belonging.

The film is as dense in its artistic references as it is humorous, even absurd. There are nods to *Zabriskie Point* (1970), to *Solaris* (1972), to Gabriel Figueroa's photography, but also to Mexican B-movies starring wrestling champion El Santo. One of the highlights is a beautifully photographed shot of a cactus field, which begins with a close-up of cacti, emphasizing their strangeness, and then zooms out to give us a psychedelic shot of



Damián Ortega  
2011  
Installation view

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the alien walking amidst thousands of cacti. Perhaps this shot is also a quotation of Jean 'Moebius' Giraud's influential sci-fi comic *Arzach* (1975) – no coincidence perhaps since Ortega started his own career as a cartoonist.

In fact, the allusion to Moebius was not far-fetched, as many of the video's elements were translated, transformed and echoed in the rest of the exhibition's pieces: Moebius, then, is not just the comic-book artist but rather the strip or knot which punctuated the gallery floor in 'Nudo 01-08' (2011). These concrete casts of a twisted-up industrial vacuum hose (which also appears in the film as the alien's hand) varied in shape and opened up from tightly to loosely knotted as one moved through the gallery. These industrial Möbius strips also echoed the Aztec figure (close to the ouroboros) of a snake biting its own tail, the symbol for eternal return.

In the film, the vacuum hose absorbs a rectangular slice of earth. In the exhibition Ortega took similar rectangles of earth from different parks in Berlin, then reconstructed them (from photographs) to create 'sculpture-postcards' of the artist's 'other' home in Berlin. The exhibition put notions of home and belonging constantly into question, as evidenced in the title of the film, and also of these five pieces, entitled 'Mutter Erde/Vaterland' (Mother Earth/Fatherland, 2011). These slices of earth move from the pastoral (amidst the twigs, leaves and moss we can see shards of glass in one of them) to the urban: a piece of concrete pavement lifted from a Berlin street. For *Sonido Grafo* (Sound Graph, 2011), Ortega painted a mural with paintbrushes classified as letters (sounds) and syntactic signs organized on a long table; synaesthesia was another *leitmotif* in this show.

Almost like a *pepenador intergalactico* (intergalactic trash scavenger, as he calls his character from the film), Ortega takes one thing and excavates its meaning, then explodes it, changes a perspective here, a texture there, to turn the familiar or homely into something unexpected and beautifully strange.

**Gabriela Jauregui**

