

GLADSTONE GALLERY

Rosenberg, Karen, "How Things Work (Or Sometimes Don't)," The New York Times, October 30, 2009, C23

How Things Work (Or Sometimes Don't)

BOSTON — What's the difference between an artist and a mechanic? At first glance, Damián Ortega's dismantled Volkswagen Beetle, "Cosmic Thing" (2002), invites such jokes. (Insert your own punch line here.)

ART REVIEW

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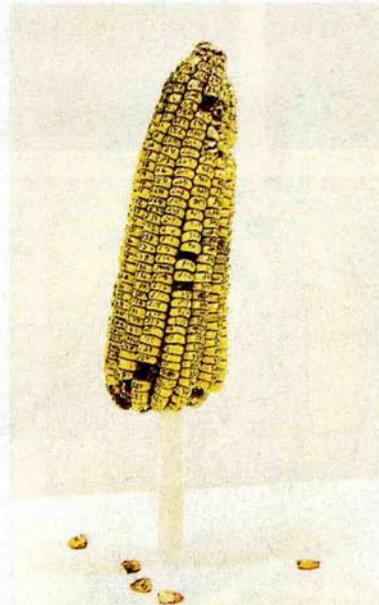
It also has a serious side that becomes apparent when considering the Beetle's status as the "people's car" and its history of production and consumption in Mexico. Following the diagrams in the repair handbook, Mr. Ortega disassembled the vehicle and suspended the components from the ceiling. The result is a kind of ritual sacrifice. (In the other works that make up his "Beetle Trilogy," Mr. Ortega dragged a car with a rope and buried one outside a Volkswagen factory.)

"Cosmic Thing" is the centerpiece of an Ortega survey, "Do It Yourself," which opened at the Institute of Contemporary Art here last month. (He also has an exhibition that runs through Saturday at the Gladstone Gallery in Chelsea.) The Boston show is full of conceptually driven sculpture and installation. The best of it is schematic yet unpredictable, a seductive combination.

Mr. Ortega, 42, is based in Berlin but was born in Mexico City. Both places figure prominently in his work. In a short video that accompanies the exhibition, Mr. Ortega cites Berlin's transitional urban landscape as a major influence. But his art materials — from tortillas to Beetles — are often staples of Mexican life.

He's also associated with a group of Mexico City artists that includes his former teacher Gabriel Orozco, the subject of a Museum of Modern Art retrospective that opens in December. A fellow student, Gabriel Kuri, has written a "User's Guide" to Mr. Ortega for the Boston exhibition catalog. All three art-

"Damián Ortega: Do It Yourself" continues through Jan. 18 at the Institute of Contemporary Art, 100 Northern Avenue, Boston; (617) 478-3100, icaboston.org. "Damian Ortega: CAPITAL Less" continues through Saturday at Gladstone Gallery, 530 West 21st Street, Chelsea, (212) 206-9300, gladstonegallery.com.



JOHN KENNARD/KURIMANZUTTO, MEXICO CITY

"Classified Cob," from the Damián Ortega survey at the Institute of Contemporary Art in Boston.

ists show at the Mexico City gallery Kurimanzutto, and are similarly inclined toward playful absurdism. (It's tempting, for instance, to interpret "Cosmic Thing" as a homage to Mr. Orozco's 1993 sculpture "La D.S.," a Citroen surgically reduced to two-thirds of its original size.)

The humor in Mr. Ortega's art can also be traced to his first career, as a political cartoonist for Mexican magazines and newspapers. It's both a strength and a weakness: he has interesting and provocative things to say, but often an arch delivery.

Jessica Morgan, an adjunct curator at the institute and curator of contemporary art at Tate Modern, has installed almost all of Mr. Ortega's work in one large room. The pieces feed off one another, but the crowded, playgroundlike setup has the gallery guards on constant alert.

The works date from 1996 to the present and reflect a mastery of the post-Conceptual, biennial-friendly idi-

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JOHN KENNARD/ELLIPSE FOUNDATION, CONTEMPORARY ART COLLECTION, CASCAIS, PORTUGAL

Mr. Ortega's "False Movement (Stability and Economic Growth)" (1999), with three oil drums standing on a base with a spinning mechanism.

om of the Orozco circle. Even so, art festival culture is sometimes a target of Mr. Ortega's wry wit. An invitation to participate in the 2000 exhibition "Puerto Rico 00," in San Juan, inspired the performance-sculpture "100 Dollars Diet." Mr. Ortega saved the small allowance given to him by the show's organizers and changed the money into 10,000 pennies. (He got by on canned food and hors d'oeuvres.) The coins, in their cardboard tubes, form a long intestine that winds along the gallery floor.

Frequent shifts in scale keep things interesting. One minute you're hypnotized by the revolving oil drums of "False Movement (Stability and Economic Growth)"; the next, you're scrutinizing the numbered corn kernels on "Classified Cob."

Also riveting is the way Mr. Ortega flouts assumptions about common ob-

jects while working with their material properties. For the sculpture "Tortillas Construction Module" (1998), he engineered an architectural tower of corn tortillas by baking them to a crisp and slotting them together. And for the installation "120 Days" (2002) he worked with a Tuscan glass workshop to produce 120 variations on the Coca-Cola bottle. Their fluted, flanged and otherwise modified forms imply different kinds of deviance, especially in light of the title's allusion to the Marquis de Sade novel.

In the three hanging sculptures titled "Skin" Mr. Ortega achieves a meaningful transformation by substituting soft materials for rigid ones. When laid flat, the tan leather cutouts correspond to the floor plans of austere modernist housing projects. Draped from hooks, as they are here, they become wonderfully

Damián Ortega

Do It Yourself

Institute of Contemporary Art, Boston

pliable and forgiving. They also echo felt sculptures by Robert Morris and organic abstractions by artists of the Brazilian Neo-Concrete movement.

Another charged substance, brick, figures in several projects, some more successful than others. In the installation "Nine Types of Terrain," nine short films show bricks toppling, like dominoes, in formations derived from Sun Tzu's "Art of War." The sight is hypnotic, the sound softly percussive.

Almost as good is a series of photographs of brick piles outside homes in Brazil and Mexico. In an accompanying statement Mr. Ortega explains that these provisional-looking stashes are a form of aspiration. Homeowners keep the bricks in reserve because they plan to expand their houses — someday, when they have the time and money.

An artist who flouts assumptions about everyday objects.

It's harder to relate to the polished-stainless-steel cubes that serve as building blocks for "Selection From Belo Horizonte Project," a set of Tetris-like sculptures. Their surfaces reflect the spectacular harbor view of the corridor outside the main gallery, but they don't feel like Mr. Ortega's work. They're uncharacteristically sleek, impassive and luxurious.

You could say the same about the large sculptures made from pressure-sanded brick and concrete in Mr. Ortega's show at Gladstone. They evoke pre-Columbian sculpture, geologic formations and utopian housing developments fallen into disrepair. Their rough edges, however, are smoothed by a display that emphasizes uniformity.

At his best, Mr. Ortega appeals to a fundamental curiosity about how things work: not just machines, but also larger social and economic systems. You can see it in the Volkswagen and in a strangely compelling video in which Mr. Ortega tunnels into the liquid center of a golf ball. They're feats of art making that can't be reduced to parts and labor.