

GLADSTONE GALLERY

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There could be few greater sources of inspiration than the constantly evolving news. So, for his latest ambitious exhibition, called *The Independent*, the Mexican sculptor **Damián Ortega** decided to make the news stands, in particular this newspaper, the starting point. Over the month of September, Ortega set out to create one work per day which will be shown from tomorrow at the Barbican's Curve gallery.

During his intense month of creativity, each morning at 9am Ortega would sit down to scour through the day's copy of *The Independent* for headlines or pictures on which to base a new piece of work. Ortega is mid-creation when we meet.

"I like the idea of doing something really independent," he explains. "It's important for myself to do something new and fresh and produce this exhibition. I like to work with daily newspapers; it was important to choose one title, and I really like *The Independent*."

Ortega, whose work is to be found in art collections worldwide, was born in Mexico City in 1967. In 2007 he secured a residency at DAAD gallery, Berlin, and has lived and worked in the Kreuzberg area of the city, with his family, ever since, returning each year to Mexico to spend time with his family there. It was in Berlin that he first picked up a copy of *The Independent*. The month of September presented incredibly fertile ground for stories, with the Chilean miners' entrapment, the eventual sealing of the BP oil spill, and the aftermath of the flood in Pakistan.

"It was a very intense month," says Ortega. "When I read the paper I realised that this was

the moment to do it, because there are so many things happening: the miners in Chile, the Pakistan flood, the Pope and the sexual scandal." For Ortega, it was also a significant period for his own heritage. "Every day, Mexico is in the news because it is the year of the bicentennial anniversary of independence and the revolution in Mexico. There are big parties and demonstrations, so politically it was important."

The exhibition also presented the artist with an opportunity to return to the deadline-fuelled world of newspapers, having previously worked as a political cartoonist in Mexico in the mid-1980s. "I like the stress and remember how exciting the days at a newspaper are. I've been waking up in the morning to read the newspapers, using all the time to listen to the radio, working during the night doing the drawings, and meeting people every day to discuss the work. And I missed this situation, so I tried to do something that reminded me of it, but at the same time making some changes. In the newspaper you need to be completely objective, whereas in art it's not necessary; I can do much more subjective work."

One of those more subjective works featured in the exhibition is a two-metre-high by six-metre-long zig-zagging wall, whose sculptural form emulates a graph of statistics depicting the number of unauthorised immigrants living in America, which Ortega found in the newspaper. Taking the image of the graph and turning it into the tangible form of an imposing wall for viewers to walk around, it could be seen as a reminder to its viewers of the 1,951-mile wall that divides Mexico and America – but it could reflect any separation wall.

"The Mexican wall is important for me because it's where I grew up," Ortega says. "But also, in



Bike curious: the Mexican artist Damián Ortega pictured alongside his sculpture inspired by the 'Independent' news story (far left) by SANDRA HILDANO

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terms of art, I like the idea of using statistics to describe a situation, but I don't want to make a representation. It is a diagram of how it works, but it's not a portrait of the people climbing or walking in the desert. It's more the intellectual description of the situation, some abstract diagram of how it works to analyse the problem. It's less emotional and more intellectual."

It is for this reason that Ortega has decided not to exhibit the pieces alongside the headlines or news stories which inspired them, leaving the viewer to form their own interpretation. "It's important to leave the pieces open. I don't want to be didactic or instructive. I don't want to convince anybody." Similarly, the first piece in the exhibition is a barrel filled with stones and sand, in which a candle burns slowly, symbolising the then plight of the Chilean miners. It's a poignant opening to the exhibition, but its starting point is left to the viewers' own interpretation.

When I visit The Curve, pieces completed in a day sit alongside half-finished works surrounded by sketches and newspaper cuttings, while a small team of builders are helping to transform his ideas. Ortega whisks me round to one such piece-in-progress which will symbolise the scandals in the Catholic Church, another work portraying statistics. Next to it, in response to the BP oil spill, a towering sculpture offers a section of the ocean, from the plant life at its base to the devastating life-destroying oily film at the water's surface. "I thought it could be nice to have a diagram of pollution and how it happens," says Ortega. "It's an incredible disaster, of course, and it's part negligence. They want to have more and more and don't take care of the workers – exactly the same as with the miners in Chile. They knew the conditions were not good, it's just the ambition of the capitalist to take more and more of the earth – the monster who eats everything."

Consumption is another concept that Ortega plays with. One piece was inspired by an advertisement in *The Independent* for leather boots, with which the customer receives a second pair for free. Ortega ordered the boots – with which he is delighted – then posted his own advertisement in the newspaper selling one of the pairs back again. "It's something I've always observed – how much you can interfere with or transform the context, or how much a context can transform you. I decided to recycle something from the newspaper and also to give something back to the news."

Attempting a sculpture a day is a big task and Ortega's final exhibition shows 22 pieces created within the month. His eyes flashing with energy as he flits around The Curve developing his works, Ortega may be an intense font of inspiration today, but does he ever find himself stuck for an idea?

"I like the idea of just drinking coffee and thinking, 'what can I do?'" he laughs. "At the end

of the day, if I don't have an idea there's just an empty space. If I don't have ideas, well, today I don't, hopefully tomorrow!" And with that, he gets back to work.

The Independent is at *The Curve*, London EC2 (020 7638 8891; www.barbican.org.uk) tomorrow to 16 January 2011



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