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November 2nd, 2023
Damián Ortega
https://www.stirworld.com/see-features-pico-y-elote-exploring-the-work-of-famed-mexican-artist-damian-ortega?utm_source=chatgpt.com

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'Pico y elote': exploring the work of famed Mexican artist Damián Ortega

The Museum of Contemporary Art, Monterrey, divides the artist's practice into two distinct sections.

by Manu Sharma | Published on : Nov 02, 2023

The Museum of Contemporary Art, Monterrey (MARCO), in Mexico, is currently presenting *Pico y elote* (until February 2024), which is the first ever in-country retrospective of the Mexican artist Damián Ortega, whose acclaim, garnered over the last three decades, has transcended the local and has placed him squarely on the international stage.



Cosmic Thing, 2002

Image: Courtesy of Damián Ortega, and the Museum of Contemporary Art, Monterrey

The title of the art exhibition translates directly to 'Pick and Corn' (although in English the exhibition has been named *Corn and Industry*), reflecting Ortega's attempts to tell an alternate Mayan creation myth, wherein maize is the origin of humanity and it is the industrial cycles it is linked to that have brought us to our current context of post-industrial chaos.

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Harvest, 2023

Image: Courtesy of Damián Ortega, and The Museum of Contemporary Art, Monterrey

The artist introduces himself to STIR, "I live in Mexico City and I work with different media. I like to experiment with different materials and the language that each of them implies. I am interested in studying objects and finding their own language, but I am also interested in the workings of those objects." He views tools as an extension of our physical and mental ability as a species to break down and divide the world around us, and to investigate it. In his words, "Tools are our research channel and define our limit to address reality. Tools are our language."



Movimiento en falso [Estabilidad y crecimiento económico], 2003

Image: Courtesy of Damián Ortega, and The Museum of Contemporary Art, Monterrey

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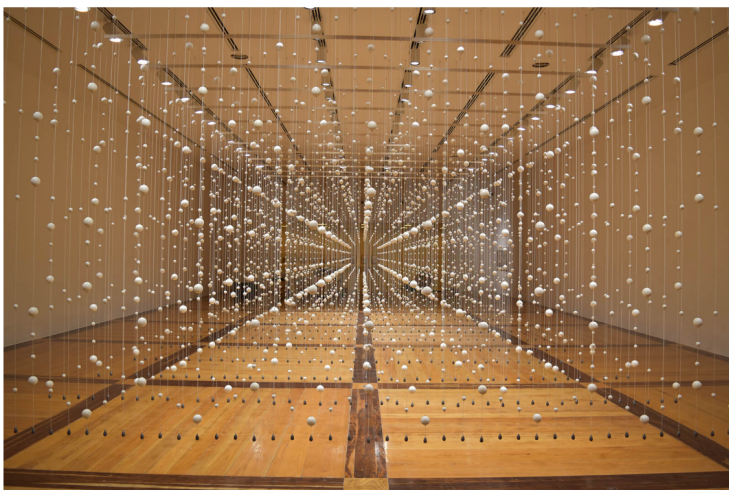
The exhibition's curator José Esparza Chong Cuy developed a framework that divided the artist's oeuvre into three conceptual divisions: Harvest, Assemble, and Collapse, out of which the first division represents a dichotomy with one side representing the natural, organic world wherein corn is an element that possess great significance within Mesoamerican culture, particularly for its pre-Hispanic association with the creation of humankind. As Ortega tells STIR, "It also addresses its validity in terms of the importance of the organic, native corn and the fight for its subsistence within the context of hyper-productivity of transgenic maize." He invokes the motto of activist groups that are fighting for the preservation of maize as a sign of identity and public health: "Without corn, there is no country". This aspect of the exhibition references the ongoing struggle in Mexico, to generate food self-sufficiency such that the nation no longer needs to purchase grain from the United States.



120 jornadas, 2020-23

Image: Courtesy of Damián Ortega and the Museum of Contemporary Art, Monterrey

The other half of Ortega's oeuvre treats the pickaxe as representative of cultural transformation along technical and technological lines through the project of modernism that has created a false illusion of progress. Ortega explains, "The pick is a symbol of permanent labour. Hence the name of the exhibition; the opposition and complementarity of these two universes."



Warp Cloud, 2023

Image: Courtesy of Damián Ortega, and The Museum of Contemporary Art, Monterrey

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Ortega discusses his relationship to his art practice, telling STIR, "In these pieces, there is a sense of duality within my approach. On one hand, I have a fascination for industry and the technology of progress. On the other hand, there is a transformation here, in terms of removing productivity from a machine and turning its production system into a communication system, in a harmonic breakdown, to recognise the different elements that constitute it. It shows the importance of each element in the ensemble. It also reveals the duality of the tool as an aggressive utensil, and from another point of view, as something affected like a victim that has been attacked. My position is reflective."



Torch Lamp, 2017

Image: Courtesy of Damián Ortega, and the Museum of Contemporary Art, Monterrey

To the multidisciplinary artist, the design of tools is a matter of particular fascination, largely around the human traces contained within their craftsmanship and usage. He notices imprints of human hands left on handles after years of rigorous usage along with the postures and positions we assume when playing musical instruments, for example. Ortega approaches machines in a manner different from many of his contemporaries that share similar preoccupations: To him, the machine is an element within society, and inherently possessed of a human quality, rather than a disjointed, inhuman limb of production. Herein lies a nuance that is crucial to approaching the artist's practice.

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Portrait of Damián Ortega, 2023

Image: Courtesy of the Belen de Benito and The Museum of Contemporary Art, Monterrey

Another show of the artist's work has recently opened at the Museum Haus Konstruktiv in Zürich, [Switzerland](#). *Essay on Exchange* (Zurich Art Prize 2023, until January 1, 2024) includes speculative pieces dealing with the exchange process between production goods and working hours. In his words, it is "a fictitious story about the forms of exchange, the invention of money and how its concept and speculation replaces matter."