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ARTS • ARTS INTERVIEWS

In Mexico City, Damián Ortega Is Seeing His Work in a New Light

Thousands have come to see his soon-to-close exhibition, “Pico y elote,” at the Museo Del Palacio De Bellas Artes.

By [Dan Duray](#) • 07/24/24 12:12pm



Damián Ortega says it's a privilege to be part of Mexican art history. Photo By Cesar Ortiz/Europa Press via Getty Images

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This week marks the last for “Pico y elote,” the Damián Ortega survey at the Museo Del Palacio De Bellas Artes. The exhibition features eighty works produced from the 1990s to the present, showcasing Ortega’s political wit across several decades and mediums that include installations, sculptures, photographs, films and textiles. We caught up with Ortega to hear him reflect on this important show in the heart of Mexico City.

How has the show been received?

The show has been very well received, thousands of visitors have come to see the exhibition and the audience is very different and plural than that which comes to art galleries. There are for sure many tourists, both national and international but also many people from different social backgrounds. I enjoy being able to see and listen to this great array of audiences, to witness them having fun and being interested in different pieces

For me, it’s a privilege to be in Bellas Artes and to be part of Mexican art history, part of the city and part of the country. This is, to share the work in such a powerful context during this specific moment. Moreover, it is important to know that I have never shown my work in Mexico in the 25 or 30 years that I have been doing art and showing in different parts of the world... in museums and being part of several collections internationally. For a long time, the doors were closed, but now I’m here.

I have thought that it is the same as if a writer had never published work in his native language, but now we have done it. I’m so pleased. I feel like an emerging artist!

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This show collects work from 1990 through to the present. Are there any older works in this show that you've seen in a new light with age?

For one reason or another I am always reconsidering and watching my own work after some years. I liked how the ideas were going forward and coming back again, sometimes moving far away and returning, creating a dialog where we could throw them all in. I think Jose Esparza, the curator, joined these links and connected the strings with constant ideas that he could decipher across the years of my practice.

Does the Museo del Palacio de Bellas Artes give them new context as well?

The Palacio is an amazing building that was constructed before and after the Mexican Revolution in downtown Mexico City. This timeline gives it an eclectic mix of styles ranging from Art Nouveau to a Mexican version of Art Déco and a lot of nationalist iconographies were inserted in the project. There is a section with incredibly strong mural paintings from many of the most important artists of the time. The design of every detail and the artworks there have a dialog with history and generate the vision of a new language and new symbols in the arts in Mexico. I find this inter-generational dialog very compelling.

You're probably best known for your pieces that suspend objects from the ceiling. How did you arrive at this look?

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It was something very natural. I just needed to break the illusion of the painting, and I was trying to show something more physical and real, presenting objects and facts instead of only representation. I tried to focus on the analysis, and I tried to use the empty space. In some way, I think of it like the Duchampian-looking glass. He said it was boring for him to paint the background of the painting... that he would rather use a glass to look through.



“Damián Ortega: Pico y elote” at the Museo Del Palacio De Bellas Artes closes in a few short days, Gerardo Landa - Eduardo Lópex (GLR Estudio), courtesy the Museo Del Palacio De Bellas Artes

The show’s press release says it’s organized in a way that favors “criteria of both plastic and conceptual nature, maintaining skepticism towards the idea of progress in Mexico.” What does that mean to you?

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In many ways, I would like to believe in progress. I grew up with the idea in mind that it was utopic to have technology to work in the fields and have it solve problems or to have medicine to cure all the diseases. And I want to preserve the dream of the future—certainly we are watching the many failures of this idea which then bring huge problems for global ecology and social stability, just to name a few. It's more than evident that progress comes hand in hand with many problems. It's urgent to rethink the social programs and to bring back humanism in order to try to break from the hyper-capitalism which relates to nature and human relations as commodities.

I wish for a better future and want to maintain a utopia: one that is handmade and in harmony with the people and the communities but also with the environment. I don't want apples with copyright and seeds that are impossible to harvest. In relation to the equilibrium of concepts and plasticity it was interesting to play for both sides in the balance.

I think my works are in-between... I like the seduction of materials and the craft but also the distance one can take to analyze and take the time to connect ideas in order to create different readings of the pieces and the show altogether.

The museum features some great murals by Diego Rivera, José Clemente Orozco and David Alfaro Siqueiros, whose politics were very in your face. These days, artists tend to be a little more coy in that regard. Why do you think that is?

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I used to work as a political cartoonist years ago in the 1990s, and the politics needed to be direct and current, but sometimes you had to be more careful and take care of the discourse, to hide the joke or create a different metaphor so that it would tell what you wanted to say. The rhythm and visual references had a short lifetime. In art the piece is still there for a very long time, or at least a couple of years later, and politics should be conscient about this fact. I would say politics and art are complex and time is part of this complexity, maybe it's not just about being coy, but taking this into account nowadays.

I don't want to produce any art with a message or propaganda; I don't need to convince anyone. I'm sure it is more respectful to believe and trust the intelligence of the audience and assume they can elaborate their own thoughts in freedom.

What do you make of the recent Mexican elections?

I feel very excited about them. Democracy has been a long process from the late '60s until now, and it's very interesting to have our first woman president. There are still many things to do, but I believe in her.

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