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Damián Ortega
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Damián Ortega's Political Spectacle

The artist's retrospective at the Museum of Contemporary Art of Monterrey, Mexico, celebrates a three-decade career that mines the complexities of Mexican culture



I was shocked to learn that Damián Ortega's exhibition 'Pico y Elote' (Corn and Industry), at the Museum of Contemporary Art of Monterrey (MARCO), is not only the artist's first career survey in his Mexican homeland but in all Latin America. Perhaps even more surprising is that, rather than being held at a major institution in Mexico City, the retrospective is taking place in the relatively obscure northern city of Monterrey, in Ricardo Legorreta's remarkable, cavernous museum – resplendent with flourishes of colour, geometric shapes and water fountains.



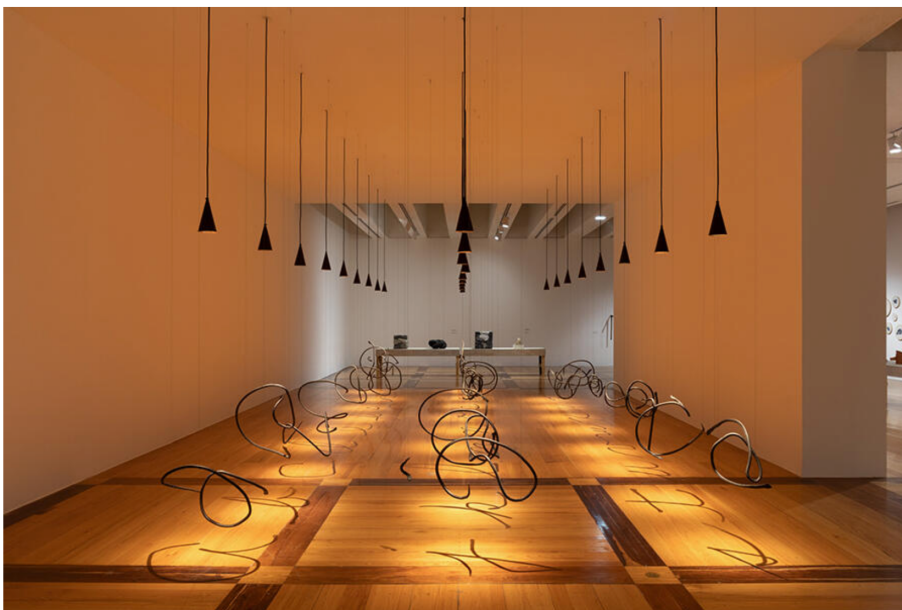
Damián Ortega, 'Corn and Industry', 2023, installation view. Courtesy: the artist and The Museum of Contemporary Art of Monterrey

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My astonishment at the exhibition's locale was also due to the notable clash between the leftist politics of Ortega – whose practice is widely known for mining and critiquing capitalist modes of production and the labour conditions of post-industrial Mexico – and Monterrey's neoliberal right population, who serve as patrons and donors to the museum. This type of cognitive dissonance is not new to the art world, of course, but feels even more pronounced here, with the show's curator, José Esparza Chong Cuy, writing in his catalogue essay: '[Ortega's] artistic drive can be understood as premonition and precognition of a failing capitalist system.' However, Ortega's brand of political criticism is not only poetic but rife with humour and irony. And, whether intentionally or not, MARCO remains an ideal foil for the artist's body of work, and a site where Chong Cuy and Ortega can achieve their curatorial vision with considerable aplomb.



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With tongue in cheek, this ambitious exhibition opens with one of Ortega's more modest pieces, *Pato Bosch* (Bosch Duck, 1997) – the head of a wooden duck attached to a Bosch electric belt sander. The idea for the assemblage came to Ortega after he accidentally left his belt sander on in his studio, its animation reminding him of the cantankerous cartoon figure Donald Duck. The piece, a portentous jest at our mindless dependence on contemporary gadgets, parades idly, its electric cord the only thing keeping it from prancing around the rest of the galleries.

In similar absurdist fashion, *Harvest* (2013) sees 26 suspended, spot-lit metal rods cast the shadow of every letter of the alphabet in a wiry cursive. An ominous metaphor for how the primordial tool of language has been eclipsed by industry, the installation is such a radiant spectacle that its political commentary is all but obscured.

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Indeed, the same can be said about much of the exhibition, in which such mesmerizing works as *Cosmic Thing* (2002) – a completely dismantled Volkswagen Beetle, each part of which is individually suspended – make the show's political undertones seem ancillary. But if we view Ortega's practice through the lens of Mexican culture, both as a celebration and a veiled critique of nationalism, this feels fitting.

In his essay, Chong Cuy quotes the anthropologist Claudio Lomnitz-Adler, stating: "national culture" (be what it may) is both a yardstick with which to evaluate modernization and an obstacle to it' (*Exits from the Labyrinth: Culture and Ideology in the Mexican National Space*, 1992). One work that best exemplifies this idea is the rare video *Moby Dick (Ciudad de Mexico)* (2005), in which the artist plays tug of war with a Volkswagen Beetle. Ortega, who greased the car's wheels so that they would spin in place and prevent the vehicle from moving forward, gives himself a fighting chance. The task, however, remains a Sisyphean one, with the artist unable to match the power of the machine's engine to pull away. Although there is no clear winner, if the Beetle – a vehicle that was produced in Mexico in millions and became a source a national pride – represents both the country's identity and capitalist growth in the 20th century, then it remains an obstacle to dissecting the complexities and nuances of Mexican culture, with which Ortega quite literally wrestles.

Damián Ortega's 'Corn & Industry' is on view at the Museum of Contemporary Art of Monterrey, Mexico until 11 February 2024