

Medium
Date
Event
Web address

Web
January 24th, 2024
Pico y elote
https://sculpturemagazine.art/digging-into-the-guts-a-conversation-with-damian-ortega/?utm_source=chatgpt.com

Publication
Author
Artist

Sculpture
Robert Preece
Damián Ortega

sculpture

A PUBLICATION OF THE INTERNATIONAL SCULPTURE CENTER



Paisaje 2, 2016. Styrofoam, 224 x 238 x 240 cm. Photo: Courtesy MARCO

Digging Into the Guts: A Conversation with Damián Ortega

January 24, 2024 by Robert Preece

Medium	Web	Publication	Sculpture
Date	January 24 th , 2024	Author	Robert Preece
Event	Pico y elote	Artist	Damián Ortega
Web address	https://sculpturemagazine.art/digging-into-the-guts-a-conversation-with-damian-ortega/?utm_source=chatgpt.com		

Damián Ortega, who divides his time between Mexico City and Berlin, began his career as a political cartoonist, and his observant wit remains evident in works that undermine preconceived ideas about art, structural and social systems, urban development, and the environment. His sculptures, photographs, and action pieces regard the utopian forms of Modernism with a skeptical eye and make their own irreverent suggestions for change. Subjected to fragmentation and spatial dispersion, his reshaped and rethought everyday objects explode the myth of a unified, static whole—whether a dwelling, body, society, or economy—dissolving into dynamic new configurations that defy notions of coherent progress and reinforce the perpetual uncertainty and flux of life.

“Pico y elote” (“Corn and Industry”), Ortega’s first institutional retrospective in the Americas, is currently on view at the Museo de Arte Contemporáneo de Monterrey (MARCO) in Mexico. Covering three decades, the exhibition features approximately 90 works in a diverse range of materials. I last spoke to Ortega back in April 2016, and in this interview, we catch up on new works and reconsider older ones.



Installation view of “Damián Ortega. Pico y elote,” MARCO, 2023–24. Photo: Courtesy MARCO

Medium	Web	Publication	Sculpture
Date	January 24 th , 2024	Author	Robert Preece
Event	Pico y elote	Artist	Damián Ortega
Web address	https://sculpturemagazine.art/digging-into-the-guts-a-conversation-with-damian-ortega/?utm_source=chatgpt.com		

Robert Preece: How does it feel to have your first museum retrospective in the Americas, specifically in your home country?

Damián Ortega: It's important to know that this had been a goal for a long time, but it had not happened, which was something that I sincerely regretted. It was a relief when MARCO, captained by Taiyana Pimentel, put an end to the inertia that had been created around the project and broke the siege. But, as a friend once told me, "That inertia also work[ed] in your favor because you have continued doing your work and the emptiness of not being there is getting bigger and bigger." In another interview, I commented that it was as if a writer had not been published in his own language. I am very satisfied with what we have achieved and with being here. It's my job, and it's in my country. It gives me great pleasure to share it and see the relationships or confrontations that the contemporary has with the traditional. There is a lot to say.

RP: One of the most recent works in the show—*Conductora* (2023)—resembles a cross-section of a log. It's made out of plaster, brass tubes, copper, rubber, PVC, bamboo, cardboard, and wood. What were you thinking about when crafting it?

DO: *Conductora* is a game of positive and negative energies. Many times, I've thought that my work has to do with the dialectic that contrasts thesis and antithesis, a rational or intuitive analysis that sometimes conflicts and generates a certain spark or knowledge. *Conductora* is a game between the conductors and the insulators.



Sol, 2015. Cardboard, kraft paper, Indian paper, newspaper, bamboo, polyurethane foam, and white acid-free adhesive, 83 x 86 cm. diameter closed. Photo: Courtesy MARCO

Medium
Date
Event
Web address

Web
January 24th, 2024
Pico y elote
https://sculpturemagazine.art/digging-into-the-guts-a-conversation-with-damian-ortega/?utm_source=chatgpt.com

Publication
Author
Artist

Sculpture
Robert Preece
Damián Ortega

RP: There is a kind of resemblance to *Sol* (2015), which also reveals its interior. Is there a relationship?

DO: *Sol* is part of a series of “stones” made with waste from my workshop. Making a piece generates a lot of waste, and I usually try to save it to recycle in some other work. *Sol* is an accumulation of packaging materials. I made another sedimentary stone using all the treasury papers, receipts, and invoices that collected over the course of an entire year. The idea is to add all that accumulation until it forms a sphere and, at the end, to make a cut to see its geological layers, like a mineral. They are like geodes, and patterns and colors of time emerge.

RP: *Organón 7* (2021), which is made of concrete, is another example of your geologically oriented works. I particularly like the textures and contrasts of the conglomerated form. What inspired you to start thinking in this direction?

DO: I am interested in the raw and the cooked, in the raw material that is nothing and potentially a whole. I wanted to show a geological state in which the material is flexible and docile, fresh and hydrated, and then turns strong and resistant, dry and fossilized. It is an event that has to do with life and the organism. These are pieces modeled on a fresh puzzle and thus they become petrified. Then rocks are made and a compact system remains. They are inspired by the walls of Inca constructions.



Organón 7, 2021. Pigmented concrete, 9 pieces, 40 x 40 x 40 cm. Photo: Courtesy MARCO

Medium	Web	Publication	Sculpture
Date	January 24 th , 2024	Author	Robert Preece
Event	Pico y elote	Artist	Damián Ortega
Web address	https://sculpturemagazine.art/digging-into-the-guts-a-conversation-with-damian-ortega/?utm_source=chatgpt.com		

RP: *Serpiente II* (2013), which resembles ribbed duct pipe arranged in a coil, is also made of concrete. Do you particularly like working with that material?

DO: Concrete is a very significant material since it is a symbol and a tacit fact of modernity. It is the material from which all the expectations of Modernism were made, the utopia of progress in my country. The snake is a kind of pre-Columbian reference; it eats its own tail and generates a trap in time, like a Möbius strip.

RP: What are your favorite materials, and which don't you like at all?

DO: I like opaque materials, matte ones, that have a story to tell, that also make reference to history. I don't like those that can only be sustained in an artificial climate.



Cosmic thing, 2002. Volkswagen Beetle '89, metal wires, threaded bars, and Plexiglas, dimensions variable. Photo: Courtesy MARCO

RP: How challenging is it to install *Cosmic thing* (2002), *Controller of the Universe* (2007), and your other “deconstructed” large-scale installations?

DO: It is a dialogue with space—with the architecture and with the flow of people. I love how Bruce Lee speaks about water and how it adapts to each space with a receptive and docile nature. And, at the same time, water can be a whip and strike with force like a wave or a flood. This is how the dialogue between the work and the site should be.

RP: What were you thinking about when arranging the precariously balanced tower of oil barrels in *Movimiento en falso* (*Estabilidad y crecimiento económico*) (2003)?

DO: It was a kind of political cartoon in which the physical experience is related to a visual trap. It is an optical game linked to a political illusion, where oil seems to be the alternative to all problems and is a fiction.

Medium	Web	Publication	Sculpture
Date	January 24 th , 2024	Author	Robert Preece
Event	Pico y elote	Artist	Damián Ortega
Web address	https://sculpturemagazine.art/digging-into-the-guts-a-conversation-with-damian-ortega/?utm_source=chatgpt.com		



Movimiento en falso (Estabilidad y crecimiento económico), 2003. Three petroleum barrels, rotating base with engine, and wooden platform, 440.1 x 120 x 120 cm. Photo: Courtesy MARCO

RP: *Harvest* (2013) consists of a field of calligraphic steel sculptures set beneath an array of lamps. Would you agree that the shadows cast by the sculptures, which become line drawings, are as important as the sculptural elements themselves? Why is the work titled *Harvest*?

DO: There is a close relationship between cultivation or harvest and the collecting of sticks and making bundles of branches. It has to do with the root of the word “write” in Sanskrit. Reading is collecting rods, and rods are letters. The physical experience has nothing to do with the visual or with memory or dimensional experience. In the end, I am left with the question: What should I believe in? The material and the physical or the shadow and the memory?

RP: Why did you undertake your “Transformers” series (1999–2021)? And why use crustaceans to contrast with plastic toys?

DO: The Transformers impacted my generation, signaling a future that I could already see coming as a child. The presence of robots and humans interests me. I heard a theory, which says that the materials of the future should be organic and recyclable, like renewable cells. Thus, they should not produce waste; instead, they should be like living membranes, something that regenerates. This is how the idea of making mutations between robots and crustaceans arose.

Medium	Web	Publication	Sculpture
Date	January 24 th , 2024	Author	Robert Preece
Event	Pico y elote	Artist	Damián Ortega
Web address	https://sculpturemagazine.art/digging-into-the-guts-a-conversation-with-damian-ortega/?utm_source=chatgpt.com		



Works from the “Transformers” series, 1999–2021. Plastic toys and crustaceans, dimensions variable. Photo: Courtesy MARCO

RP: *Warp Cloud* (2018) is a beautiful and complex mirage of a sculpture, made of suspended beeswax-covered plaster balls configured to make various patterns through space. Could you explain this piece?

DO: *Warp Cloud* is a reflection of the artwork as a vapor or water in space, and its composition is similar to a loom. They are vertical threads, and they reproduce a water molecule. Geometry expands, and there is a fascination with its nature. It is a journey toward a molecule.

RP: What is *Paisaje 2* (2016) about? What comment on the rigid white cube are you making? Are you freeing it?

DO: I’m digging into its guts—revealing its interior and seeing the relationship between the solid and the empty, between the constructed object and its waste.

“Pico y elote” is on view at MARCO in Monterrey, Mexico, through February 11, 2024.