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Artist

Metal  
Eve McIntosh  
Damián Ortega

**METAL**

SEARCH



DAMIÁN ORTEGA

A MASK OF HIS OWN FACE

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**Are masks alive? Damián Ortega's new exhibition featured at Gladstone Gallery, New York, is both a commentary on social-political status and personal identity. Displayed 6pm - 8pm from 15 March to 23 April, this exhibition solely features masks he has brought to life from inanimate objects in his home and found materials that represent Mexican life and culture, building an intimate reflection of a community through the everyday.**

We talk to Ortega about the origins of masks, his origins as an artist, the characters of his creations, and the homespun charm of this project that aims to pull people together with gratitude and familiarity.



**Damián Ortega, you are an acclaimed contemporary artist with an extensive career, dating back to the '80s when you started off as a satirical newspaper cartoonist, to your current fame for transforming everyday objects into art that features a social commentary. How would you describe the style of your work?**

(Laughs) Flyer pieces!

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**Why did you make the change from illustration to working with physical matter?**

It's a long story...I will describe it to you quickly: I started as a cartoonist because I wanted to be a muralist painter. A very naive idea at that moment, but I had decided to design my own career. I thought the mural was a kind of political cartoon on a large scale. Then I began studying with a cartoonist. Also, I started in a painting workshop group. I tried to learn about these divided worlds. Painting was the way to understand materials and little by little I started to be more involved in the tridimensionality of the paint and to conceptualise the pieces. In the end I was painting car pieces and the jump into objects was very logical and obvious. It is better to work with real objects instead of trying to represent them.

**One of your best-known works is 2002's *Cosmic Thing* – your deconstruction of a Volkswagen Beetle to suspend it mid-air piece by piece in the fashion of an instruction manual. Coming from Mexico yourself, and this car being mass-produced there at the time, was this a commentary on the consumerism and capitalism that was being advertised as the people's car?**

It was a work about collectivism and the global or grupal participation with individual elements. I mean, it was the analysis of a system. A complex system divided and classified in functions, relations, communications...But the piece opens the discussion to many layers and possibilities. The piece became very popular and this opened it to interpretations in different places and countries.

**How do you think showing objects we recognise as fragments like this allows us to perceive them in a new way?**

I used to be very curious with my brother when we were just kids. We opened many objects and things to see how they worked and how they were made. It was a funny task, and of course we destroyed everything. I don't know, I think we always thought things are not only what they represent. Things can be something different.

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**Since then, your solo exhibitions have been featured around the world, such as in the Kunsthalle in Basel in 2004, the Tate Modern in 2005, The Los Angeles Museum of Contemporary Art in 2005, the Museo Jumex in Mexico City in 2014, and Hangar Bicocca in Milan in 2015. Are there any exhibitions which stand out to you as a highlight of your vast career?**

What I have appreciated very much is when I have found myself doing real research, when I have been able to go further and deeper into the project. I think when an artist defines his or her own investigation and has the chance to open the alternatives to go into it is amazing. Everything runs well, there are no stops, no failures, no mistakes because everything is part of the experiment. Right or wrong doesn't matter. Everything complements the investigation. I love that situation. It doesn't always happen in the right places, sometimes a good show takes place somewhere not many people can visit, or the opposite, a terrible show is presented in the most popular place.

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**Your new exhibition – which is available in Gladstone Gallery in New York from 15 March to 23 April 2022 – focuses entirely on masks, which have been a predominant marker of human nature and culture throughout history. Can you talk to us about your decision to use materials you consider to be essential to Mexican life to make these masks – such as guaje, yute and corn tortillas? Does it convey a personal reflection of your identity in these living characters?**

Like many people, I was confined [in lockdown] and I felt anxious but at the same time a kind of pleasure to have time to be alone and work in privacy. I tried to recycle materials stored in my studio, residues from other pieces and wasted materials. I found this process very intuitive, I just started putting and mixing materials to release pressure and I played with faces and random materials. My father had just passed away and he was an actor. I saw him many times watching himself in front of the mirror creating a character and inventing his way of walking and talking.

I always think of this time as a great moment and place for invention and imagination. I realised the process of doing the masks was very easy and also very joyful. In the end it was a representation of this new era and the materials of this specific place and time. It meant looking for solutions and expressions. Tortillas or rice paper are daily materials that are consumed at home. I'm sure if I had been in New York or Berlin, a different thing would have happened.

**How do you think others in your community will reflect on these masks?**

The reaction is lovely. I think people and friends are sharing some similar experience and feelings. I mean, I can't see any bigger productions in arts and that kind of art produced as industrial objects with anonymous workers and the artist as a brand. On the other hand, all the young artists that are fascinated with technology, with ambitious systems of production, and with overthinking and over conceptualising their works. I respect them and I'm sure there are many amazing pieces but I feel totally out of this logic and I tried to go for a straightforward and personal experience. With a human scale and kind of homemade [style]. It's funny how the formats change in a crazy way and sometimes when you have the chance to see the real and original piece of art you think, I thought it was bigger. Or sometimes museums amplify the art works to make them more popular. The original became insufficient and tinny after this spectacularization of the art. It's fun for me to make these decisions with format to save and keep some humanism.

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**I read that these materials appeared to you in a more organic and personal way than usual, as many of them were from your kitchen or garden and allowed you to keep creating art in response to being stuck at home in the pandemic last year. Do you believe that this creates more intimate and immediate artwork, instead of using home-products solely for improvisation?**

I think art is context and food is part of life and culture. I choose daily life materials because I feel we are what we eat, what we buy and what we use in our lives - sometimes an egg or sometimes french fries or Belgian chocolates. I mean we are all this.



**Thinking about the characters of these masks as well, I read that you believe masks have a life of their own, and in a way create themselves. Can you expand on this? Does each mask in this collection have a different character or personality, and therefore adds something different to the collection?**

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To my surprise, I found that masks decide most of the time what they want or what they need. They are a little bit like children. I have two daughters and I can push them a little bit to do what I think is important, but I am learning to let it go and I am trying to support them. They know better than me what they need and what they want – when I force or push them is a waste of energy for both sides.

If you are blind and do not listen to what they tell you, it is not like magic, but I'm sure that if you are receptive and listen to the forms and shapes and specially to the accidents, you can see how expressive they are in themselves.

I think the amazing pieces in art history are part of this chance and opportunity. I'm sure *She-Goat* by Picasso would have been impossible if he hadn't encountered the palm tree leaves and a few other materials by accident. I'm sure he didn't research different kinds of leaves on amazon to buy the right one. He was playing and resolving. Maybe the same happens with the goat and *Automobile Tire Print* by Rauschenberg, I don't know. I just prefer at this moment freedom and improvisation. Intuitive works.

**Time is another significant aspect to this exhibition, asking us the question – where did masks begin and where will they end? It seems that the art of creating masks, for culture or for personal identity, has been around as long as people themselves. By bringing otherwise dead material and waste to life in these newly constructed faces, do you consider this work to be adding to this flow of time in a search for identity and belonging that is as old as all communities?**

I like what you said. Cultures and humans, we create masks, and masks are contemporaneous sisters of the fire and the sharpness of knives. They have evolved with the human being and become part of our tools of communication, myth, fear, irony and the critic. We can look back and understand a lot about a civilisation by observing its ways of wearing and constructing masks.

**You recently said something in relation to this, that really piqued my interest. You talked about collecting the surplus material from these masks, and the importance of looking at what has been left out of your creations, saying that “they tell you your plans will have consequences.” Does this relate to this idea of time, or what is lost to time, or is this more of a comment on sustainability?**

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It's important because we have grown into the ideal of production, but this means waste and consumption. And also some emptiness on the other hand. I mean, [until recently] we didn't have a clear understanding of the importance of the ecology and also the responsible use of nature.

Now we should have more clarity. Our system is just looking at one side of the problem and this is off balance. We should decolonise the systems of production. And this is not only about materials, it is also about people and how cities are receiving thousands of millions of people and immigrants.

**What is next for you, after this exhibition? With lockdown eased you will once again be able to get your hands on any materials you need, but will you continue to favour more intimate sources now you have made these masks?**

I don't know, I hope all this global experience really teaches us to be better and generous, to be responsible and have fun with less. To understand life as an opportunity to share. The inertia is strong and difficult to be stopped, maybe it is a matter of doing small actions and to start with some alternatives.



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Whistler, 2021 © Damián Ortega. Courtesy of the artist and Gladstone Gallery.

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Crystalline Spirit, 2021 © Damián Ortega. Courtesy of the artist and Gladstone Gallery.

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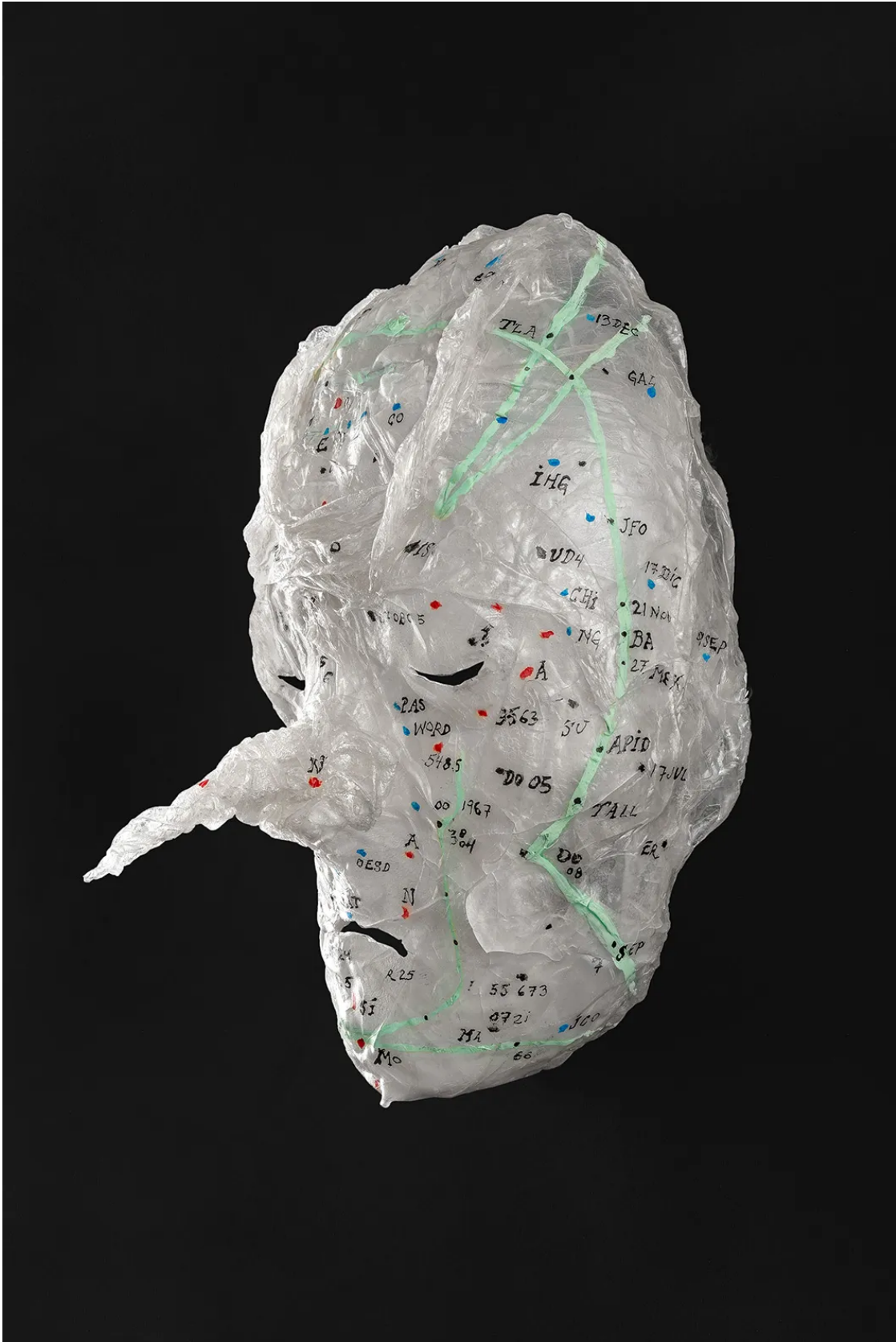
Tortilla Skeleton, 2021 © Damián Ortega. Courtesy of the artist and Gladstone Gallery.

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Acupunturista, 2021 © Damián Ortega. Courtesy of the artist and Gladstone Gallery.

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