Art in the gap between words and images

RODRIGO HERNÁNDEZ

It’s a misconception that every child’s first word will refer to their parents. I once babysat a girl who picked “Oh look!” instead. Since first utterances are signifiers that encompass the entire world, she applied her “Oh look!” to whatever fell under her gaze, as proof of the alchemical connection between all things visual and verbal.

The artist Rodrigo Hernández is a self-confessed fan of René Magritte and, particularly, his essay ‘Les mots et les images’ (Words and Images, 1929, published in La Révolution surréaliste), which calls into question our automatic ways of seeing and abstracting the world. Hernández’s paintings, reliefs, sculptures and installations operate like machines for flexing the imagination by triggering encounters between imagery and meaning-making.

Hernández’s titles are narrative, poetic, philosophical and often mysterious. Like fragments to be deciphered. Take, for instance, ‘Qué escucho cuando escucho el discurrir del tiempo?’ (What Do I Hear When I Hear the Flow of Time?), 2019, installation view, Sala Siqueiros, Mexico City. Chilean, the artist, Galería Madragoa, Lisbon, and ChertLüdde, Berlin. Photograph: Simon Glaeser.


Born in Mexico City, and based between Lisbon and his hometown, Hernández is more than acustomed to the slippages of meaning across cultures, languages and narratives. His parents enrolled him in a Japanese immersion school in Mexico City until the age of 7. He then studied history and philosophy before turning to art, which he pursued at Jan van Eyck Academie in Maastricht and the Kunstkademie in Karlsruhe. His fondness for the synesthetic leanings of the futurists, from Filippo Tommaso Marinetti to Giacomo Balla and Fortunato Depero, evident in his recent vivid paper-mâché sculptures – such as Natal (Christmas) and Obregón (Embrace, both 2019) – is rooted in the freedom of interpretation and misinterpretation inherent in all forms of translation. Surrealism is another key reference, especially the enigmatic paintings of the De Chirico brothers. Giorgio and Alberto (better known as Alberto Savinio). Savinio’s fascinating novel Hermaphrodite (Hermaphroditico, 1938) is an exercise in polysemic and polyphony, with different languages co-existing in the same sentence and four different endings. ‘The Gourd & the Fish’. Hernández’s 2016 exhibition at SALTS, Basel, was inspired by Josephine’s Catching a Catfish (1931) to a Guard, a 19th-century ink painting that also serves as a boon – a story or question formulated to test a student’s understanding of Zen Buddhism – on the non-duality of reality. The artist divided the small exhibition space into two identical halves, creating adjoining rooms with parallel entrances guarded by hanging polyurethane casts of a non-descript figure, like twin translucent ghosts. Inside, he painted the walls in dizzying red and blue optical stripes, and installed two vibrant geometric reliefs in painted paper-mâché, partially inspired by vintage Emilio Pucci patterns. The result was an immersive environment in which eye and object, figure and background, two and three dimensions continuously played off each other. Hernández adopted a similar strategy for ‘O mundo real não alça voo’ (The Real World Does Not Take Flight, 2015, exhibition view, Pitiú, São Paulo). Courtesy: the artist, Galeria Madragoa, Lisbon, and ChertLüdde, Berlin. Photograph: Everton Ballardin.

Photograph: ChertLüdde, Berlin; Courtesy: Galería Madragoa, Lisbon; Lindsay Pedigree, 2019; Courtesy: the artist.


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AMSTERDAM

Rodrigo Hernández

galère fons welters

A wide, white partition on the side of the narrow front room of the gallery. Behind it, a slim, transparent wall, also white, blocked the view of the rear of the larger space beyond. This created the corridor-like setup that Rodrigo Hernández, who divides his time between Lisbon and his native Mexico City, designed for his recent exhibition “Dampcloot.” “The show included nine playful, intensely colorful papier-mâché sculptures, all likewise titled Dampcloot and numbered 1 to 9 (all works 2020). Placed close together on that plinth as the summer of the event unfolded, they seemed to explode as a point of focus in the immediacy of the white cube. The group (including the support) could well have been seen as a single multipart work rather than a gathering of separate pieces. The only work separated from the rest was a framed watercolor drawing, Dampcloot of 9, on the other side of the false wall.

Each of the sculptures had its own specific palette and patterning, yet they were all characterized by modernist dimensions—some reached two feet in any dimension—and chromatic brightness. From the granulite Dampcloot of 0 has a patterned layering and scale that accentuated its commonality with the other works. Collectively, they all seemed to share some kind of symbolic or even metaphysical function. The combination of curvilinear with rectilinear forms, their assertion of a directive that related to where and how their interconnected shapes abruptly ended, and the frequent presence of appendages that framed as well as combined the sculptural and spatial surroundings all emphasized that this grouping was a presentation of abstract postulations. The arrangement was a gathering of ideas—some evidently fragmentary, others more complete—that had literally been given shape and color and volume. The vibrant collection of compressed suppositions stood crowded yet in unison on the clear-cut boundary of the shared white box.

And here was where the title Dampcloot came into play. The word was proposed by seventeenth-century Flemish mathematician Simon Stevin, who coined it as a Dutch translation of Galileo’s “vaporum sphaera,” “vaporous sphere”—what later became known as “atmosphere.”

Stevin combined two short words—as sounds and as terms for vision—to represent something still in movement, to describe something that could not yet be precisely explained by science. It was a way to reconfigure unwritten wisdom and assign it a fixed foundation. While Hernández’s works and their presentation seemed detailed in their construction and conceptual underpinnings, they also remained open to ways that could further stimulate new connotations and constellations of significance.

—Hilke Heijnen der Werf

OSLO

Bouchra Khalili

fotogalleriet

In early March 1970, Jean Genet agreed to visit the United States to campaign for the Black Panther Party. Asked by the organizers if he could travel on short notice, the legendary writer said yes, all his possessions fit into a small suitcase. Genet left France the following day, sneaked into the US via Canada, and, starting in New York, launched into a dizzying two-month tour of American college campuses, accompanied by Black Panther Party members. He lectured American students and intellectuals on American racism and encouraged them to support the Black Panthers and their chairman, Bobby Seale, who was then on trial for murder. Although the crowds largely were drawn to Genet’s status as a cult figure, he never strayed from the issue he had come to address.

Bouchra Khalili’s video Twenty-Two Hours, 2018, tells the story of Genet’s work with the Panther while also highlighting the act of storytelling as an alternative form of historiography. The narrative involves through Quiana and Vanessa, two young Black Americans who are filmed as they assemble photographs, film footage, historical documents, and so on—relating to Genet’s journey. What they speak to—their historical facts or talk among themselves—their voices are sound and sound, as if reading from a script. Yet they themselves are very much embedded in the work, whether we see them sitting in a dark room talking or in close-up as they stare identically into the camera. The resulting discourse echoes the disconnect between written history and the bodies that were, between printed sources and eyewitness testimony, the layering of which is a central aspect of Twenty-Two Hours.

Doug Miranda, a former member of the party, is brought in as a witness to Genet’s tour and questioned about the specifics of his role as an ally to Black empowerment. The work proposes the construction of history as a continual process for which each new generation needs to take responsibility.

View of “Rodrigo Hernández, 2020.”

Twenty-Two Hours

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4K video, color, sound, 45 minutes.

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Twenty-Two Hours

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4K video, color, sound, 45 minutes.
Rodrigo Hernández's current exhibition “I Am Nothing” packs a surreal punch with a rambling display of humble papier-maché and cardboard sculptures, found objects, and paintings. The artist combines Giorgio de Chirico’s perspectival metaphysics with Russian space exploration, poking holes in our conceptions of time, space, history, and the self.

The show’s title echoes the first words in Patrick Modiano’s 1978 novel Rue des Boutiques Obscures (translated to Missing Person for English-reading audiences), narrated from the perspective of an amnesiac detective. Figure 1, 2013, is a humanoid with a hint of a nose—a peripatetic creature Hernández has dragged along to a number of exhibitions. Its front is like a fleshy blank slate, while its back carries the weight of the world in newspaper clippings. It is leaning on Mozaika (Mosaic), 2016, a red school chair carrying a box of objects: a clock face and mechanical clock gear, a plastic eye, a round bell, and miniature papier-maché works. Who is Figure 1? Modiano’s protagonist? Walter Benjamin’s angel of history? The artist himself?

Hernández’s paintings are litmus tests of primordial urges. The oil-on-wood I Am Nothing (Dinosaur), 2016, depicts the titular beast looking askance at a De Chirico piazza. Across from it, Drawing Without Gravity, 2016, is a recreation of an outer space drawing contraption Russian cosmonaut Alexei Leonov designed, along with a copy of a sketch of the Earth he made while aboard the Voskhod 2 spacecraft. Konstantin, 2016, discreetly leaning in a corner, seems at first glance utterly out of place. A slab of inverted L-shaped cardboard, painted white, has been cut into to cradle a photo album. An upside down portrait of a man with a mustache, of the pornish seventies variety, in a red shirt, hands tucked into his jeans’ pockets, leans against a wall with one leg up—a quintessential hustler pose. Here we find desire, another kind of levitation, waiting to taunt us.

— Jo-ey Tang

Artist: Rodrigo Hernández

Exhibition title: The real world does not take flight

Venue: Pivô, Sao Paulo, Brazil

Date: September 1 – December 23, 2018
Pivô is pleased to present *The real world does not take flight* in its Annual Exhibitions Programme. This is the first institutional solo exhibition in Brazil by Mexican artist Rodrigo Hernández and is the outcome of a two months residency at Pivô, where the artist developed papier-maché sculptures and an installation directly on the walls of the exhibition space.

The title is appropriated from the first verse of Polish poet Wisława Szymborska’s poem “The real world”. Szymborska was a Nobel Prize in literature and her main subjects were daily life, history and nature articulated in a colloquial language of powerful poetic effect. Hernández takes inspiration from the relation between dream and reality suggested in the poem to create an immersive environment where geometric patterns painted on the walls relate to the sculptures hanging on them, so painted forms and tridimensional reliefs correspond to each other.

The artist departs from the singularity of the architecture of the exhibition space to create a large-scale wall painting based on geometric patterns used in fashion and 60-70’s Op art, covering the space with color gradients that generate an atmospheric environment. Papier-maché objects – between tridimensional paintings and wall sculptures – are presented in the areas of color transition. Hernández plays with geometric and organic shapes overlapping one another, puzzling the relations between “background” and “figure”. Transformation and regeneration are the main subjects of both the mural and the sculptures.

Working mostly with classical medias and techniques of art making, including drawing, sculpture and painting, Hernández is interested in the constitutive movement of art and image making, from Meso-American iconography to contemporary art. His projects vary from object-making within a devoted studio practice to site-specific and research oriented projects. He draws on a number of aesthetic references, which range classical Japanese printmaking to fashion, and European modernism, among others, to develop a very personal formal vocabulary.
Rodrigo Hernández, *The real world does not take flight*, 2018, exhibition view, Pivô, São Paulo

Rodrigo Hernández, *The Possibility*, 2018, Cardboard, papier mâché, acrylic paint, oil paint, 43x35x14,5 cm

Rodrigo Hernández, *My head left the axis*, 2018, Cardboard, papier mâché, acrylic paint, oil paint,
Rodrigo Hernández, *Alive*, 2018, Cardboard, papier mâché, acrylic paint, oil paint, 56x81x21,5 cm

Rodrigo Hernández, *The real world does not take flight*, 2018, exhibition view, Pivô, Sao Paulo

Rodrigo Hernández, *Why this specific self?*, 2018, Cardboard, papier mâché, acrylic paint, oil paint, 42,5 x 43 x 20 cm

Rodrigo Hernández, *Why this specific self?*, 2018, Cardboard, papier mâché, acrylic paint, oil paint, 42,5 x 43 x 20 cm
Rodrigo Hernández, *The real world does not take flight*, 2018, exhibition view, Pivô, Sao Paulo

Rodrigo Hernández, *We, too, can divide ourselves*, 2018, Cardboard, papier mâché, acrylic paint, oil paint, 47 x 43 x 9 cm

Rodrigo Hernández, *De-trans-visibility*, 2018, Cardboard, papier mâché, acrylic paint, oil paint, 31 x 30.8 x 14.5 cm

Rodrigo Hernández, *These cells*, 2018, Cardboard, wood papier mâché, acrylic paint, oil paint, Variable dimensions

Rodrigo Hernández, *These cells*, 2018, Cardboard, wood papier mâché, acrylic paint, oil paint, Variable dimensions
Rodrigo Hernández, *The real world does not take flight*, 2018, exhibition view, Pivô, Sao Paulo

Rodrigo Hernández, *Elsewhere*, 2018, Cardboard, papier mâché, acrylic paint, oil paint, 50x42x12cm
Your Guide to the Best Shows in Basel

From Bruce Nauman at the Schaulager to the story of a 1970s artist community in Corona at Weiss Falk, all the shows to see in town this week

By Aoife Rosenmeyer

Rodrigo Hernández, Zapaya, 2017, cardboard, wood, oil paint, 36 x 30 x 15 cm. Courtesy: the artist, Galeria Madragoa, Lisbon, ChertLüdde Gallery, Berlin and P420, Bologna

Rodrigo Hernández, ‘The gourd and the catfish’

SALTS
15 June - 25 August
Opening 6-10pm, Thursday 14 June, with a performance by Khairani Barokka at 6.30pm

While Art Basel is in full swing Samuel Leuenberger will be best-known as curator of the Parcours project, but for many years he has run his own project space (in his own home) in the Birsfelden suburb, now co-curating it with Elise Lammer. How do you catch a catfish with a gourd? This is the 15th century Japanese koan that inspires Mexican artist Rodrigo Hernández’s presentation. Hernández picks enigmatic phrases and ideas from sources as disparate as his visual references. (At Salts he will show sculptures, a mural and relief pieces embedded in the wall.) Since 2013, each fair season at Salts has also included ‘The Printed Room’, a literary project initiated by Quinn Latimer, which Harry Burke now programmes in its final chapter. The diminutive space will host two complementary projects: Formidable Sparkles by Bhanu Kapil, and Selected Annahs by Khairani Barokka.
Rodrigo Hernández: THE GOARD & THE FISH at SALTS, 14 June – 24 August

For his 2017 exhibition at Madragoa, Rodrigo Hernandez filled the Lisbon gallery with a gridlike floor sculpture in a suprematist palette of red, yellow, blue, white and black. Attached atop of this frame, which the visitor was forced to carefully navigate, were a series of metal sheets engraved with a generic sexless figure that has been a reoccurring presence in the Mexican artist’s work. One became incredibly aware of one’s own body (be it a clumsy body or, on the night of the opening, a drunk body) within this context. A version of Plasma was shown at the Liste fair in Basel the same year, but this is Hernandez’s first show proper in Switzerland. At SALTS, expect something different (the artist is unpredictable: for a solo show in Riga last year he outsourced production to local children), though the body in space is a reoccurring subject for the artist. According to the off-space (a refreshing change from the commercial and institutional juggernaut that Art Basel brings to the city), Hernandez took a fifteen-century Zen ink painting as inspiration for this show, Catching a Catfish with a Gourde, the title describing a man performing contortions as he attempts his seemingly impossible task.
I've been coming to Basel for years, both as a consummate art lover and in my role as director of Swiss Institute. Over the course of my many trips to the city -- filled with visits to some of the world's best museums, and meetings with artists and curators -- I've always been impressed by how vital art is to the city's urban identity. It can be found almost everywhere you look, at the highest quality, in a city with fewer than 200,000 inhabitants.

So while Art Basel is the major draw this time of year, it's far from the only show in town. Here are some of the most exciting exhibitions to look out for beyond of the main event:

Summer exhibitions at SALTS

SALTS, tucked away in the city's outskirts on the banks of the Birs river, is one of the most exciting contemporary art institutions in Basel. The space is run by Samuel Leuenberger and curated by Elise Lammer. In addition to their astute selection of today's most compelling artists, what sets SALTS apart is their innovative approach to site-specificity. Each exhibition engages with the non-traditional gallery space in a fascinating way -- sometimes completely transforming it, other times enacting subtle, poetic gestures.

This week, they're opening solo exhibitions by artists Rodrigo Hernández and Jumana Manna, along with exhibitions by Bhanu Kapil and Khairani Barokka in the Printed Room, their space dedicated to the display of literary objects and printed materials.

Exhibitions by Rodrigo Hernandez, Jumana Manna, Bhanu Kapil and Khairani Barokka are on at SALTS until Aug. 24, 2018.
Where is this beloved Eva, whose name is incorporated into the title for Rodrigo Hernández’s current exhibition and serves as the namesake for each work within it? She is in the past: a onetime lover of Picasso, who inscribed her name on a piece of gingerbread in his 1912 collaged painting Guitar: “J’aime Eva.”

There’s something cruelly comedic, of course, in etching one’s love into a cheap edible, destined to go stale. Hernández’s show converts this spirit of perverse amour into a series of relief paintings—done in oil, acrylic, wood, and papier-mâché—that radiate Cubism’s influence without disappearing into it.

In Éva, 2017, a green parrot sits in profile, its body broken into curvy chunks by a slender brick chimney. Both bird and object are grounded by blue within a sharp ellipse, red-edged and reminiscent of a distended Lucio Fontana slit or, for those with a Freudian penchant, certain anatomical features. Outside this circumference, it’s all midnight blue, except for some white lines suggesting a grand cosmic schema. But softness is drained from the picture by the parrot’s silliness—one dotted eye stares blankly—and the work’s shoebox dimensions, which suggest an extremely well-crafted children’s project.

Another piece called Éva, 2017, finds a square support broken into a few angular planes. A single black spot could be an eye, and yellow and brown sections could be sandy hair. But it’s hard to know; the work is comically myopic, like a mashed cartoon. Dotingly executed, such works evidence Hernández’s ability to circumvent the smothering power of his own modernist references. Throughout, his cubist paraphrases are rendered in a storybook aesthetic, heightened by a band of blue painted across the gallery wall, like rising water. The exhibition expresses a strange desire not just to play in the theater of artistic inheritance, but to sally forth with the prescribed artistic roles provided therein.

— Mitch Speed
RODRIGO HERNÁNDEZ AT CHERTLÜDDE, BERLIN

The starting point is the summer following the invention of collage in 1912, when Picasso spent some weeks at Céret and Sorgues in the company of his lover, Eva (Marcelle Humbert). One of the experiments of this summer was the attempt to incorporate true relief and, in at least one case, an actual object on the canvas surface in the only collage Picasso seems to have executed during that summer, titled Guitar: J’aime Eva. This unusual work may have been partly inspired by a portrait by Henri Rousseau. The painting, titled Myself, Portrait and Landscape, portrays Rousseau in the costume of an “artiste-peintre”, as he liked to call himself, complete with artist’s beret, palette and brush. Rousseau wrote the names of his two (then-deceased) wives, “Clémence et Josephine,” upside-down on the palette in a naive but moving tribute to his beloved muses. Picasso may have had this portrait in mind when he wrote to his dealer Daniel-Henry Kahnweiler on 12 June 1912: “Marcelle is very sweet and I love her very much and I will write it on all my pictures.” The work which seems to correspond to this statement is Guitar: J’aime Eva. In its original form, which has been preserved only in photograph, Picasso wrote the words “Jaime Eva” in faux naïf, childlike handwriting.

The exhibition features eight three-dimensional objects integrating painting, drawing and collage on their surface. The gallery has been transformed into a space partially submerged under water, where the pieces appear to be floating.

Another sculpture one is greeted by right at the entrance of the gallery gives a general summary of this image: there, one sees a human face indecisively coming out or submerging itself in the water, integrated with a model of the gallery space; the water level draws a horizon line where the outside seems to meet the inside.

This moment of transition has a parallel in one of collage’s most fundamental principles: the transfer of material from one context to another and its arrangement in order to produce a new reality, whose coherence follows no other rules than those of a fabricated new logic.

Collage is said to be a subversion of all conventional figure-ground relationships and one of the most plastic materializations of the notions of difference and context, but most importantly it can be understood as an attempt to bring together life and work literally onto a same unique surface, determining and perhaps contradicting the distance between them.

J’aime Eva by Rodrigo Hernández

ChertLüdde, Berlin
Through November 11

TAG
BERLIN, CHERTLUDDE, RODRIGO HERNÁNDEZ

FB — TW
Les mots et les images

Amy Zion on the enigmatic art of Rodrigo Hernández

I met the artist Rodrigo Hernández (b. 1983, Mexico) last year, when he was on a residency in New York. He invited me to his studio and we began an ongoing dialogue. In that first meeting in his apartment and work space in Brooklyn, we sat at a desk he had set up on front of the window of his bedroom, looking out at a nondescript, semi-industrial landscape. He would sit there and observe the light as it reflected off of three or glowing buildings, two painted different shades of yellow and one brick, set against a pale blue sky. Over the course of his six months stationed in the room, he produced twelve simple compositions of this same scene in oil on board (Untitled/NY Painting) (2016). Simple in form and subject to Exi Abarca invasions on Mount Tamalpais, his compositions were more hard edged, graphic and focused on recording the subtle changes in light at different periods of the day and under different meteorological circumstances. At one time, the works seemed to be an auxiliary practice, more a form of meditation and daily ritual than a series connected to his main preoccupations.

In Inland terms, Hernández makes sculptural installations, small paintings and drawings related to subjective intuitions. His practice concerns intellectually abstract subject matter rooted in existentialism, Surrealism, Mexican art history, pre-Columbian culture and an eschewal of literary references including Patrick Modiano, Roberto Waizer, Juan Ballón and Bersá. é lifts his most recent. Much of his work particularly the characters found in his drawings is inspired by a subprofessional aesthetic moments in visual culture that betray a lack of total formalization evidence of personal fluencies by unknown artists, visible in objects meant for public use or display. Likewise, he is attracted to drawings by non-artists, such as those by Konstantin Yudin, who produced annotated illustrations related to early Russian space exploration. On his work, children, an area of study that recently inspired an installation, The Sleepers of Tangier (2017), which he produced and finished with the aid of local youth in an outbuilding at Kasr, in Tangier. Hernández was born and raised in Mexico City, which he still considers to be his home. He studied Mexican history and philosophy at university before switching to art, and finished his degree in Karlsruhe, Germany. Following encouragement from his teacher, the artist Silvia Bich, he stayed in Karlsruhe and pursued a masters degree there. Bich became a source of inspiration, a mentor whom he new credits with changing his way of thinking about art and what it might be. In 2013, Hernández continued his studies at the Jan van Eyck Academia in Maastricht, Netherlands. In 2014 he began another year in Europe, at the Kunsthuis in Basel. Consequently, he developed a network in Europe, and when we met in New York he was planning a solo exhibition at the Hadelberger Kunstraum, which opened this past biennale (By coincidence, Bich received an invitation to exhibit at the museum and they invited their exhibitions to coincide.)

The exhibition in Basel was titled 1 Am Nuthing. It began as just a concept, an allusion to the first line of Modiano’s novel Musée d’Orsay (1976), in which the main character, a character of popular culture who moves through the world. Hernández was thinking about what it means to strip man of everything, including the ability to find meaning in life. Since 2013, he has produced installations centered around a simple, human-like anthropomorphic figure titled simply figure (2013). It is made of paper and on a stainless steel frame and resembles a scaled-up version of a white marble statue from the Cycladic period in Greece. This man travelled to Heidelberg and occupied a central position in the exhibition. The figure was surrounded by various sculptures that linked his everyday objects, as well as paintings and drawings. For Hernández, the objects that he has chosen to receive were supposed to be the basic, quotidian things that we relate to as we move through life. At the same time, the objects were meant to fail to perform what role of relatability, as they were designed to remain unfamiliar, recognizable and distant. For example, an apple made of painted paper on cloth is at once an apple and a work of art. The objects are enigmatic. They are meant to be puzzling to the man, but they are also real sculptures. The project is a kind of meta-reflection on the act of making and its relation to how we make meaning in the world.

In that rather dense idea is some kind of perspective, Hernández is drawn to Surrealism and particularly de Chirico’s style of drawing in which he attempted to conceal literal meaning in his artwork. To inhabit one of de Chirico’s psychological landscapes is like being in outer space; it is an opportunity to rethink the way we do the most basic things on earth; how we cry, how we clean a glass, how we open a door. There is the potential to think and see through the lens of a child, testing and questioning the way we do the simplest activities in our everyday lives. Hernández’s figure is meant to be a conduit for reflecting upon our status in the world. He, the figure, encounters objects for the first time without any context and must make sense of them anew. How do we know that an apple is something we consume? And why do we pick it up, bite into it and chew it?

This idea to question all a priori assumptions about basic aspects of life occurred to Hernández, who works on these projects years before his art education. His parents sent him to a Japanese immersion school in Mexico City until the age of seven. The school was established in the late 1970s for the families of Japanese business people in Mexico. Hernández was one of the only students without any Japanese background. He was taught by Japanese teachers who did not speak Spanish. So at an early age, he learned a foreign language and was introduced to an alien culture. Most importantly, he did not learn through translation or by comparison to Mexican culture, but through images, gestures and repetitive actions. This immersive education involved a mode of translation from idiograms and drawings to language and vice versa. For instance, in Japanese, the character for the word mountain is derived from an image of a mountain. At the same time, mountains, when placed next to another character, they suddenly...
create a third, totally new word divorced from any direct relationship between the two individual characters. The words were always explained through small, simple diagrams and never in relation to Spanish. On the same phrases were used daily until their meaning became clear. Eventually pronunciation was introduced, but his primary education was based on reading and extracting meaning from images.

Hernández’s experience at this Japanese school and his early exposure to seeing the world through the lens of a radically different culture informs his general approach to artmaking. He would watch the students in Section A, the most immersive section for students planning to return to Japan, eat their lunches, and he realized there were totally different ways of doing the most common ritualistic activities. Instead of beginning from the premise that we all know what the world is, that it is one thing, and that an artist can find some sort of Archimedean point above it, from which she looks down and produces art and commentary, his work remains stuck in the swamp of the world; it tries to understand, first and foremost, what are the consensuses and disagreements we have about the world—why, for instance, is a piece of writing paper white and square, or why is an exhibition, with its standard formulas and timeframes, like a dark suit that all have agreed to wear to work everyday.

Some of the NY Paintings were included in the exhibition in Heidelberg, and over time, through our conversations, I began to understand the works’ connection to the rest of Hernández’s projects. Although he is interested in the meditative aspects of drawing and painting, the fences take on a different meaning when placed in the context of figure 1, of paintings inspired by Tatulkesy’s drawings, or of the artist’s continual fascination with Magritte’s approach to language. In Magritte’s ‘Le sens des images’ (1929), there is a small drawing of a brick wall with a caption that reads (in translation): an object that makes you think there are other objects behind it. The walls in Hernández’s painting in some ways act as barriers to meaning, barriers to seeing the picture in order to make sense of it. They keep you on the surface of the work, inside the exhibition with Figure 1, trying to sort out the world anew alongside him.

That is a rather simplistic and literal interpretation. It is tempting to reach for meaning when it dangles so low in the ground like this, whereas most of Hernández’s paintings and drawings deliberately resist such smooth explanation. For instance, silhouettes resembling figure 1 and brick fences appear in other paintings, such as a small, triangular oil on wood titled A Reminder (Who needs you every minute) (2016). In it, a simplified human figure stands in front of a brick wall framed by two white walls.
A stripe of primary-color-patterned rectangles runs partway through the middle of the figure. The work, especially the triangular form of the picture plane and the enigmatic strip of color running through the center, resembles the mystical abstraction of Hilma af Klint. Most of Hervé Decréz's drawings and paintings are difficult to write about, because they begin in language and depart into a highly coded visual logic.

The paintings in the series Selva (2016–ongoing), for instance, form scenes in an autocratic narrative about a woman named Selva, who records and transmits to the artist her boyfriends' dreams about the murals of Mexican artist and historian Miguel Covarrubias (1904–1957). These works draw particular inspiration from B. Chil, who uses long and poetic titles or explanations to illuminate highly economical compositions and line drawings. For instance, in the small painting We are walking together in Paris (2016), a pale, open palm, depicted against a solid gray background, holds four tiny, anthropological or nondescript objects.

Another in the same series is titled A bird lands on our table and plays with the patterns on the wood, like jumping from one place to the other (2016). The latter describes a scene of two figures at table in a placeless dreamscape. Together, the works are clues to a story never meant to fully emerge, but instead to take us somewhere beyond language. Hervé Decréz's story makes us aware of our need to form meaning, and his works encourage us to reach beyond the ways we have been taught to make sense of the world. Ultimately, the artist invites us to experience the world as if we had just arrived.
Rodrigo Hernández

HEIDELBERGER KUNSTVEREIN
Hauptstraße 97
September 17–November 20

Rodrigo Hernández’s current exhibition “I Am Nothing” packs a surreal punch with a rambling display of humble papier-mâché and cardboard sculptures, found objects, and paintings. The artist combines Giorgio de Chirico’s perspectival metaphysics with Russian space exploration, poking holes in our conceptions of time, space, history, and the self.

The show’s title echoes the first words in Patrick Modiano’s 1978 novel Rue des Boutiques Obscures (translated to Missing Person for English-reading audiences), narrated from the perspective of an amnesiac detective. Figure 1, 2013, is a humanoid with a hint of a nose—a peripatetic creature Hernández has dragged along to a number of exhibitions. Its front is like a flimsy blank slate, while its back carries the weight of the world in newspaper clippings. It is leaning on Mozaico (Mosaic), 2016, a red school chair carrying a box of objects: a clock face and mechanical clock gear, a plastic eye, a round bell, and miniature papier-mâché works. Who is Figure 1? Modiano’s protagonist? Walter Benjamin’s angel of history? The artist himself?

Hernández’s paintings are litmus tests of primordial urges. The oil-on-wood I Am Nothing (Dinosaur), 2016, depicts the title beast looking askance at a De Chirico piazza. Across from it, Drawing Without Gravity, 2016, is a recreation of an outer space drawing contraption Russian cosmonaut Aleksei Leonov designed, along with a copy of a sketch of the Earth he made while aboard the Voskhod 2 spacecraft. Konstantin, 2016, discreetly leaning in a corner, seems at first glance utterly out of place. A slab of inverted L-shaped cardboard, painted white, has been cut into to cradle a photo album. An upside down portrait of a man with a mustache, of the pornish seventies variety, in a red shirt, hands tucked into his jeans’ pockets, leans against a wall with one leg up—a quintessential hustler pose. Here we find desire, another kind of levitation, waiting to taunt us.

— Jo-ey Tang

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“Things are moving” is a series of paintings that began in 2013 when I asked my friend, the curator Emiliano Valdés, to choose a composition based on photos of paper cut-outs I had sent him. Since then, I’ve invited different people to propose a change to the latest version of the image: I apply this change each time, making a new, consecutive painting featuring the previous changes plus the latest one.

By working on it with my own hands and at a slow pace, almost at a gestural level, this series of works is a reflection on two ideas: abstraction, especially the trajectory of its function and status in certain contexts, but also, and at the same time, its potential to be a self-sufficient, unreadable system; and movement, one that is very slow and constant, progressing towards a point that is constantly receding and that is still impossible to imagine in the present.
A VISIT TO THE EXHIBITION: RODRIGO HERNÁNDEZ. EVERY FOREST MEDITATES WITH THE MOON HAS A HIGHWAY CROSSING IT FROM ONE SIDE TO THE OTHER, CURATED BY CHRIS SHARP, KURIMANZUTTO, MEXICO CITY.

João Mourão/Luís Silva: Hi Rodrigo, thank you for taking the time to show us your exhibition. We wanted to see it for a while now, and having the opportunity to do it in your company is really exciting. We are very curious about the title, Every forest meditates with the moon has a highway crossing it from one side to the other, but we hope that it resonates much more in its original form in Spanish, Todo bosque locamente enamorado de la luna tiene una autopista que lo cruza de un lado a otro. Would you like to tell us a bit about it or about how it relates to the works, before we go in?

Rodrigo Hernández: Hi guys, I'm really happy you are here! The title of the show comes from a poem by Marinetti, the Italian futurist. But I first read it in Spanish. I remember I had to re-read this particular line a couple of times feeling there was some kind of mistake in the translation or something. I realized what happened was that on the first reading it seemed to be broken in two parts: one first image (the forest meditating with the moon) gets interrupted by a second one (a highway crossing it from one side to the other). But because of the way it is written, the highway would also be something that is by nature existing inside of the forest, something the forest has, like a vascular system or a backbone helping it stay standing. The first image is interrupted but also completed or even woven up by the second one. If I could, I would rather try to explain with my hands or with a drawing what I feel this line from Marinetti's poem is doing. This impulse to physically escape language is in general one of the motors of my work. In any case, the result of this is an image full of paradoxes that still now makes me doubt if I'm reading it correctly. I really enjoy these long-lasting moments of doubt that refuse a final logical resolution and I wanted to play with this dynamic in the show here at kurimanzutto. So you can really say the works operate in a similar way to that image from Marinetti. At the same time, extracting it from the poem dealt with other two ideas that are important for this exhibition: erasing context and the traveling of images.

JM/LS: Should we walk in them?

RH: Yes, let's do it!

JM/LS: We see what you mean by paradoxical images and pushing the viewer into a long-lasting or unsolvable state of doubt. The works, which are fundamentally images despite being three-dimensional, seem to operate on a double paradox, one that is simultaneously formal and narrative. Formally they seem to be one thing, but we suspect that they are something altogether different. There is a certain sense of suspicion towards their own materiality, as if they were pretending to be something they actually are not. And narratively, one can't help but wonder how familiar they are, while being completely foreign. We recognize them, and the references they depart from, but at the same time we can't help but feel as if something just doesn't add up, which is very uncomfortable. Was this intentional?

RH: Yes, this was intentional. But let me explain a little how I see it; I wanted the show to contain some questions I had during my research and while working at the studio, and I wanted to hand these questions over directly to the viewer, without restructuring them in the form of an affirmation. Sometimes questions can be uncomfortable in the sense that they are a sign of a system that is somehow not adequate to dealing with the world, and express a real need to push the walls of what is seen as defined. But I would say there is also a big pleasure and happiness to this need, at least for me personally. Each of these works is indeed a question. While making them I felt I was at the same time trying to find out how or discovering the way to make them and building up a personal system to move forward. What I wanted was to give shape to this interrogation about the making of the making itself. And the material solutions and the play with the references were tools for this purpose; a way to keep the questions active until they would reach the viewer. I like to think of that image of the trickster from Native American mythologies: a mischievous spirit or anthropomorphic animal playing tricks and questioning conventional behavior. He acts first and asks questions later, and he operates on his own intention. He's not inside society but in front of it and from there he has to discover his own personal rules, logic and language. A metaphor, I think, of the positions we often take as artists, which from the outside are supposed to make one thing but is really happening on the inside.

In this sense, it was great to have a dialogue with Chris Sharp who is the curator of the show. Together we worked on how the pieces are displayed in the room and we were asking ourselves what kind of sentence would be the sentence of pieces be, if a sentence at all.

JM/LS: What you just said is very interesting, on one side you draw a parallel between the figure of the artist and that of a trickster (who bypasses conventional behavior) as a modus operandi, and on the other you attempt, through this specific set of works, to give shape to, or embody, a meta-reflection on the act of making (and marking art, for that matter), through the use (more or less would say) of historical references. Aren't you afraid that people will feel misled or fooled? We're asking you this because we have always been very committed to the idea of the hoax as a performative tool of sorts for exposing the world in a productive way (Kunsthalle Lissabon was initially riffing on the idea of the institution as a hoax), and listening to you speak we feel you are on a similar path.

RH: Hoax is a great English word! One of those I always read with some doubt. Maybe because it is so close to 'ax' and 'fox'. But going back to your question: I wasn't afraid the works in the show could be misleading, but fooling someone on the other side was never the point. I believe these are two things that don't necessarily go together. What I can say is that I wasn't at all being cynical about the questions we were talking about before.

Whenever I have the chance to speak with someone in the exhibition – like with you right now – I am always happy to find out there is no incorrect way to approach the work. I can agree with basically anything that can be said about it and don't feel my point is lost on the way, because what I want is exactly the opposite. I want to overcome the idea that even how the work is discussed changes and gets pushed as far away as possible from some of the usual conventions of communication, still so surprisingly present and strong in the art discourse (X means Y; A comes from B, etc.) and more proper to the dynamics of information, as Boris Groys calls it, than to other ideas I feel more attached to: freedom and mystery, for example.

The other day I was with someone in front of one of the works and we couldn't see some part of it looked like a big eye. Later, someone else pointed to that same element and said I looked like a pizza. We could agree for sure that an eye or a pizza aren't very elaborate ideas by themselves, but the fact that they suddenly had become interchangeable is something I enjoyed very much seeing happen. It's not like an object or an image can become something different from one day to the
other — or not only this — but that we can arrive at a point where we see with different eyes. Meaning, in this case, that an object (a group of objects or an exhibition, for that matter) can be that thing triggering the question "what do I see?" and that this seemingly simple question might run on an extremely long distance in a wide variety of directions. It's probably the start of a conversation. The eye/ plasma or any of these works are just a departing platform; they are not what I'm saying, but little things placed along a flow of ideas, like teeth feeling the air going around them when words are uttered. Like a U shaped platform, to be more exact, from which air spirals inward and outward. Paradoxically it's on the specific form of these "teeth" that we spend most of our thinking and time on.

I wonder if this relates somehow to that thing you said about the institution as a hoax and the way you operate at Kunsthalle Lipsen.

JM/LS: It does! In the beginning we attempted to perform the institution as a hoax exactly because we wanted to ignite a discussion about what was at the core of the institution and the best way we found to achieve that was through "faking something into existence." A very important fictional companion at the time was Tess McGill from Mike Nichols’ 1988 film Working Girl. She is amazing, a great hoaxer! But the hoaxes and tricksters apart, this is a very serious show; it seems to go deep into the nature of what an image, or to be more accurate, an artwork is (or may be), wouldn’t you say?

RH: Yes, the show is indeed asking these rather serious questions, but a very important turning point for me was when I began feeling loose about them again and started playing around with possible ways to approach them or detours to avoid the need to face them directly. I’ve always had a strong interest in making stuff and in putting my hands in action, so turning my questions into objects really happened naturally. That’s also how it occurred to me bringing together images from Futurism and from Miguel Covarrubias’ book Indian Art of Mexico and Central America. There was this idea of going back and looking forward at the same time, and of making objects that confused the categories of new and old, leaving the eye with some trouble in connecting the dots. I have to think of that movie from Woody Allen The Sleeper, where the future has such a dumb, old-fashioned look. The film is a funny parody of science fiction but also a great love story about time collapsing.

But going back to the show, I know it was in a way a total absurdity to bring these two worlds together, but that is exactly what really got me excited; that feeling of swimming freely among images that I love, regardless of their origin or possible meaning, detached of their context, so to say. This, I think, is also what shifts the attention of the show as a whole from the particularities and from anything that could be specific information for something else, maybe to that "spiral air" I was talking about before. It seems to me that all images and objects are needed to hold a little secret, and that we play into their romantic game. This is also one thing this show was about.

JM/LS: Rodrigo, this was great, thank you so much for taking the time to show us the exhibition. We really enjoyed it! Should we maybe go for a drink? Do you know any nice places around?

RH: And thank you for your visit! I enjoyed talking with you very much. Why don’t we now go have a soup somewhere?

All images: David Trumet en vivo with the moon has a highway that crosses it from one side to the other. Installation view and details, Kunsthalle, Mexico City, 2015. Courtesy the artist, Galeria de la Plata, Mexico City.

Photo: Diego Pérez

Allow me to introduce Rodrigo Hernández with an anecdote: walking down the street one day in Oaxaca City, he had no peace to admire the ceramics on a sign in a street window in which the first part had been done by a professional painter but the second part, presumably added later, had been done by an amateur who sought to imitate the professional, but with wondrously weak results. It was precisely that second part, and the inimitable airness of each letter that composed it, that so charmed the artist.

For all its simplicity, this anecdote is incredibly telling about Hernández’s intense and his approach to making art. An adopt and lover of the handmade, the Mexican, currently New York-based, has driven by a desire to refuseawaking to its most fundamental, if primal, components, which for him have a great deal to do with drawing, sculpting, space and the relation between the three (even if what he does also occasionally includes collage and painting). This reduction is not just limited to form, but also to color. When not asking basic questions like: to err is human and to err is spectacular through the works themselves (e.g. what is a drawing?), Hernández asks them literally, such as with the title of an artist book published on the occasion of his 2014 solo at the Beamnemannmuseum in Maastriech. What is in between? On a new formal level, the anonymous, primitivist figures he depicts, instantly portrayed singly in large, open spaces, in graphite, paint and three dimensions, border on stick figure quality, while his patients are dominated by mostly unmeaning primacy of line. To date his most complex material is probably polyethylene, deployed to create a two-dimensional, quasi-stick figure sculpture — otherwise, his formal vocabulary consists of graphite, paper, rice paper, oil on wood, plastic, papier mâché and other basic art stuff. DH at the first glance, would not be seen as anything out of step with the current moment.

However, despite all appearances, this work is not naïve. In the richest and most expanded sense of the cléf, it is disarmingly simple, in that it seeks to disorient the viewer through the immediacy of the handmade, the elementary quality of what is portrayed as well as materials used to dose, and the wide open, highly articulated spatial configurations that characterize his installations. Indeed, deeply human, the work that Hernández’s work portrays is an idealised world, blissfully devoid of the surfeit of information, material hyperactivity and conspicuous consummation of the twenty-first century. Dreaming more than it seems to reflect, it reflects through dreaming, as if it were vry just indicated precisely what was missing. And it thus this ability to dream about and reflect on the world in the most refreshingly essential terms that makes this work so compelling.