

AKINCI Amsterdam

Raul Ortega Ayala

Portfolio

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Babel Fat Tower
Exhibition View Ruins Recycled
AKINCI 2011

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Babel Fat Tower (2009)
Fat, bones, table, light
70 cm, table 74 x 118 cm
Exhibition View Ruins Recycled
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The Last Supper
Exhibition View
Stroom The Hague 2010

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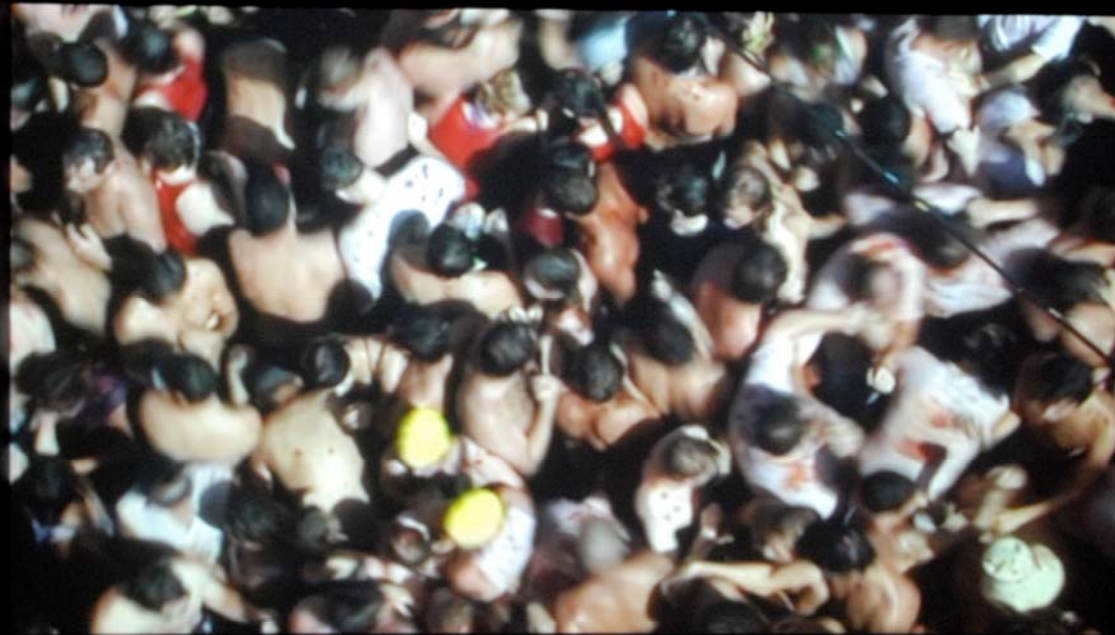
The Last Supper (detail)
Exhibition View
Stroom The Hague 2010

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Melting Pots
Exhibition View
Stroom The Hague 2010

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Tomatina/Tim (video still)
2010

Two Channel Wall Projection
Approx. 14:41 min
Exhibition View
Stroom The Hague 2010

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Tomatina/Tim (video still)

2010

Two Channel Wall Projection

14:41 min

Exhibition View

Stroom The Hague 2010

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I'D RATHER DO SOMETHING WORTHWHILE

My thoughts continue, untroubled by the presence of the abandoned desks
and the dispatch section with its papers and balls of twine.

Pessoa, *The Book of Disquiet*

The Office is a species of white-collar factory that gathers billions of people world-wide into the efficient spaces and functions of administrative production. In other words an idle, frustrating, vicious place designed to encourage all the uglier aspects of human beings (and thus no doubt to distract them from politics). What's an artist to do, in such an environment? Many, like Douanier Rousseau, Einstein, Eliot, Melville, lived a double life: a ghostly, remunerative, respectable one by day, even if like Bartleby they 'would rather not'; a creative one by night and possibly at weekends. Raúl Ortega Ayala's approach is nearer to Pessoa's in promoting the day job to the status of artistic element, except that Ortega Ayala takes a positive interest in papers and balls of twine. More purposeful than the poet, he enters into drudgery both because he must, and because any sphere of activity can provide material for art. Each of his series is born from the ordinary experience of a workplace, including stints in New York kitchens and as a gardener in London.

Of course, if you've actually toiled in an Office, there's no need to generalise about it. Recent artists have fastened on social, 'relational' issues from a speculative or statistical distance; *Bureaucratic Sonata* differs strikingly from the half-baked anthropological operations that often result, because the author has an insider's intimacy with detail. As if to signal the distance between documentary realism and the poetic yet scientific approach embraced by Ortega Ayala, his is a mythical, retro office, reminiscent of the Dickensian galleon of Monty Python's *The Meaning of Life*; a world of elastic bands, wooden desks, map pins and post-its, with not a computer screen in sight. Such paraphernalia resembles that of an equally classic schoolroom, and Ortega Ayala plays the doodling dreamer who undermines the ethos of both places. It's not a rebellious, let alone a work-shy posture; sure, rather than 'push the envelope' he braids Watteau-esque ropes of them for a swing, and rather than 'think outside the box', he multiplies boxes to infinity. But the most demented clerk would admire the care with which the artist inks the fine edges of innumerable post-it notes, or tippexes over a desk. The diligence in his brand of deviance—beyond temperamental obsessiveness—explores ideas of metamorphosis and mimetism, through the remix of function or scale. In his *détournement* of humdrum equipment by means of analogy, metaphor, epigram and allegory, Ortega Ayala moves both much closer up and much farther back than any obvious critique of social control in the post-industrial age.

On the close-up level, 'Paper and coloured pencils used to imitate a form' is perhaps the most emblematic piece, with its tiny size, playful concept, painstaking craftsmanship, and method of breaking down components to transform them into a new object. It's not always an object: eraser shavings or pencil lead are worn down to produce image and language, respectively. In contrast, the post-it notes work by accumulation. With them Ortega Ayala builds up a wide arc of allusions, from strictly minimal orderings to romantic figurations of autumn leaves. Somewhere in the middle I would place the gorgeous outfurling of quasi-floral, quasi-mathematical forms—the duality of Islamic tessellations—that generate themselves, unplanned, says the artist. Like the pyramids of '50 pencils...', or the cuboid spider's web of '...a form on a corner', they result less from a process of invention than from one of experimental discovery. Ortega Ayala sets puzzles for himself about the properties of materials or the exponentiality of possible structures, like a researcher inquiring into the laws of nature: physics, biology, optics, geometry... And in this sense he stands far back from his thematic pretext.

There are also some literally huge pieces, but size is incidental as these share the delicacy of the rest, along with many formal traits. The

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mise en abyme through mirrors of a rigorously pared down, open-plan office (a planned but as yet unmade work) turns it into one of the patterns of compartments that recur throughout the *Bureaucratic Sonata* series, on different scales, from neon-filtering louvres upward; the Aviva Tower that veils myriad square eyes to leave two punctuation signs, could equally well be a tricky arrangement of post-its. However, the binary (1/0) system of communication for this image, and the sender's finally irreducible status as a temple of administrative production, make it one of the rare pieces to be primarily about man-made laws. Another is the video 'Calf Roping', which shows one force acting upon another, the essence of politics. It first strikes us as a rueful joke about modern masculinity. After all, clerical work since the early twentieth century has been such a lower-middle-class-female affair that in the social imaginary, business males who are anything less than ruthless bosses or jet-setting execs are seen as emasculated, diminished, often ridiculous. But the bathos in this displacement of the glamour associated with virile subjection of nature onto a sad-sack struggle with an office chair, overlays something else: the far more laborious, 'feminine' action of the artist upon his material; a material which is, as elsewhere in this series, conceived to be animate. The scrambled words of another piece ('Letters from a desk nameplate...') can be reassembled as 'Something precious comes from achieving the difficulty of it', and this is key to the effortfulness of 'Calf Roping'—especially in view of the wonderfully inappropriate sound-track, the Blue Danube that skips along to some casual, tranquil ideal of harmony between male and female, active and passive, artist and object, culture and nature.

Tighter dichotomies feature in this work about work: work/sloth, work/home, work/sex, work/play—but deconstruction/reconstruction is the spur. Thus in the dismounting/ remounting of 'A carpet, a suspended ceiling, a chair and 22 light fittings manipulated to create a space' (Ortega Ayala treats all elements as though they were of a kind), the tension between figuration and minimalist abstraction is superbly deployed to create what I'd call an *atmosphere*, familiar yet alien, fizzing with trapped energy and light. This space really demands to be empty. One begins to feel that the human is too chaotic, too intermediate a dimension to contemplate: indeed the artist only turns to the 'suits' peopling the office in order to harvest the lint off each, a rather more visually appealing microculture, susceptible to being classified without mess. If name-plates are again metonyms for individuals, then the phrase 'I'm Useless but God Loves Me' could, for all its irony, be taken to sum up the strategic position of the whole work. To humanist delusion, creative hubris, the can-do rhetoric of success spreading horribly from the business world, Ortega Ayala opposes a stance of imaginative, facilitating attention: receptiveness to and collaboration with the mirrorings, repetitions and cyclical transformations of matter and form, practised with tender quirkiness in pursuit of objective truths.

The philosopher Simone Weil thought that escape from collectivity lies not in the private sphere, but in the *impersonal*. If 'Calf Roping' suggests the vanity of bending the world to one's will, *Bureaucratic Sonata* as a whole explores an alternative so well that throughout the Office—most inauspicious of places—one almost catches the impersonal throb of Nature. Or is it the buzz of a light fitting?

Lorna Scott FOx

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RAUL ORTEGA AYALA

Education:

- 2001—2003 Master in Fine Arts, Glasgow School of Art combined with Hunter College, New York, U.S.A.
1995—2000 Visual Arts, E.N.P.E.G. (National School of Painting, Sculpture and Print)
1995—1998 Philosophy, National Autonomous University of Mexico
1994—1995 Cultural Sciences, University of the Cloister of Sor Juana
Painting, E.N.P.E.G. (National School of Painting, Sculpture and Print)

Solo Exhibitions:

- 2011 ROKEBY, London
2010 Stroom den haag, The Hague
2010 The Kowalsky Gallery, DACS, London, curated by Gilane Tawadros, selected by Francis Alijs
2009 *An Ethnography on Gardening*, Rokeby, London
2008/9 *Una Etnografía sobre la Jardinería* Museo Experimental El Eco, Mexico City
2006 *Raul Ortega Ayala*, The Economist Plaza, Contemporary Art Society Commission
2006 *Bureaucratic Sonata*, Rokeby Gallery, London
2005 3 site specific works from the Bureacratic Sonata Series, Arts Depot, London
2004 *Risk, Do not disturb*, a project in combination with Jemima Burrill, Hiscox Art Projects, London
1997 *Speculations on wood & circumstance*, Vitro Corporation, Mexico City
1996 *Natura*, Cloister of Sor Juana, Mexico City

Selected Group Exhibitions:

- 2011 Mexico, Örebro Konsthall, Sweden
2011 Ruins Recycled, Galerie Akinci, Amsterdam
2009 Foodprint, *curated by Marieke Berkers, Stroom den haag, The Hague*
2009 *At Your Service*, curated by Cylena Simonds, David Roberts Foundation, London
2007 *It is not a question of knowing....* The Frye Museum, Seattle
2007 *Contemporary Video*, PUNCH Gallery, Seattle
2006 *Orange*, A Festival of Art and Food in Montreal, Canada
2005 *The acceptance world*, Laura Barttlet Gallery, London
2005 *Mexico 70*, Casa del Lago, Mexico City, México
2005 *Bloc*, County Hall, London
2004 MEDIUM:FILM, Mariakappel, Hoorn, Holland
2004 *inbox : glasgow*, Central Gallery, National Centre for the Arts, Mexico
2003 *EV+ A*, Limerick, Ireland

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- 2003 *Rock Candy*, Mariakappel, Hoorn, Holland
- 2003 *60 years of art*, Central Gallery, National Arts Center, Mexico
- 2003 *MFA Glasgow*, Tramway, Glasgow & TENT—Witte de With, Rotterdam
- 2003 *Scottish Drawing*, Xi'an and Beijing, China
- 2003 *Inport: International Video—Performance Art*, Estonia
- 2003 *Catch me if you can*, National Gallery in Tirana, Albania
- 2002 *New Contemporaries*, Liverpool Biennial, Liverpool & Barbican, London
- 2002 *Night of 1,000 Drawings*, Artists Space, New York

Selected Press and Bibliography:

- 2009 Art Newspaper, UK, Louisa Buck (29.04.2009)
- 2009 Time Out, UK, Francis Gooding (07.05.2009)
- 2009 The Independent, The Diary, Afifa Akbar (10.04.2009)
- 2009 The Daily Express, Greg Newcomb (16.04.2010)
- 2008 Time Out, Fitz the bill, Helen Sumpter (05.2009)
- 2006 Dazed & Confused
- 2006 Art Newspaper
- 2006 The Big Issue, Helen Sumpter

Selected Collections:

- AVIVA Corporation, London
- Clauastro de Sor Juana, Mexico
- Paisley Museum and Art Galleries, Renfrewshire, Scotland
- Hiscox, London
- Vitro, Mexico
- Kirkpatrick and Lockhart Nicholson Graham