

## GLADSTONE GALLERY

Johnson, Reed "Beetles, Beyond the Sum of their Parts", Los Angeles Times, October 30, 2005

# Beetles, beyond the sum of their parts

By Reed Johnson, Times Staff Writer October 30, 2005

Mexico City — IF this isn't where **Volkswagen Beetles** come to die, it's surely where they come to reproduce.

You see them all over this manic metropolis, their bulbous bodies scurrying around like scarabs gone berserk. Most visible are the hundreds of green-and-white **VW** taxis, their dashboards piled with little plastic statues of the Virgin of Guadalupe and St. Jude to keep robbers and kidnappers at bay. Other Bugs are family vehicles, offering cheap transportation to Mexico's urban lower-middle class. Small but fierce, they elbow their way past buses and zip around lumbering trucks.

On a mild autumn afternoon here recently, Damian Ortega stepped into the cobbled streets of the picturesque Tlalpan district, where he keeps his art studio, and hailed one of the ubiquitous VW cabs. To Ortega, the homely little "people's car" is more than just a cheap way of getting from A to B. It's the quintessential Mexican Every-car for the quintessential Mexican Everyman, a stalwart voyageur that ventures out each day to do battle with monster traffic jams and noxious air, like some sort of modern, metallic Ulysses.

It didn't take seeing Disney's "The Love Bug" to make Ortega ponder the almost mystical attachment that some Mexicans feel toward their Beetles. The artist was born in 1967, the same year that **Volkswagen** opened a manufacturing plant in Puebla and began churning out its distinctive cars. Arriving at a time when working-class Mexicans were striving for upward mobility and the country was swelling with nationalistic pride and student unrest as it prepared to host the 1968 Olympic Games, the Beetle came to symbolize a nation in swift, unsettling transition. Ortega can remember when his parents bought their first VW Bug, in the late 1960s, and when they gifted him with a Beetle of his own in 1983. "I think it was the cheapest car, really,"

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he says, "and it was a perfect car for the city and for a small family."

These disparate associations -- mythic, aesthetic, socioeconomic -- are the framework around which Ortega constructed "The Beetle Trilogy," which will have its Los Angeles debut this week in an unusual collaboration between the Museum of Contemporary Art and the Gallery at REDCAT. With the humble Volkswagen as its unlikely protagonist, the trilogy traces a narrative cycle of life, death and resurrection that is, by turns, comic, heroic and oddly moving.

The first element of Ortega's three-part work is the sculpture "Cosmic Thing" (2002), a disassembled gray Beetle that is being strung from a ceiling grid in MOCA's large, skylighted Gallery A. Acquired for MOCA's permanent collection shortly after it was completed, "Cosmic Thing" exaggerates the Bug's anthropomorphic features by exploding its parts outward in space, giving it the head-on appearance of a giant insect or alien life form. Imposing and disorienting in its monumental scale, "Cosmic Thing" has put some critics in mind of an Aztec pyramid.

## Giving a Bug life

THE trilogy's second and third **episodes** involve an extended conceptual riff on the idea of the Bug as a mysterious living entity with a will of its own. "Moby Dick" (2005) is a 16mm **film** documentation of an action/performance that Ortega orchestrated last summer on a surreal stretch of L.A.'s lower Grand Avenue, between the loading docks of MOCA and REDCAT. In it, Ortega stages a physical (and metaphysical) tug of war with a greased-wheel Bug attached to ropes and pulleys. Aided by four grunting assistants -- including REDCAT gallery director-curator Eungie Joo -- Ortega wrestled with the car as it lunged like a harpooned whale.

Meanwhile, a group of musicians assembled for the occasion banged out **Led Zeppelin's** "Moby Dick," which features a legendary, seemingly endless solo by drummer John Bonham, hammering away with a monomaniacal intensity worthy of

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Capt. Ahab. "It was very interesting to see how strong you had to be to control the car, because they all four were red and they were sweating

Herman Melville's novel "Moby-Dick," a story that Ortega says he has known since childhood, is a 19th century Romantic epic about man versus nature, or God, in the early decades of the industrial age. Ortega's "Moby Dick" might be described as a mock epic that interrogates humanity's relationship to nature and the divine in our own anxious post-industrial age. Edited down to about 15 minutes, the filmed version of "Moby Dick" will be projected on a curved REDCAT gallery wall that evokes the concrete sweep of lower Grand Avenue.

Part 3 of the trilogy, "Escarabajo," is the filmed travelogue of the VW's [journey](#) back to its Puebla "birthplace," with Ortega behind the wheel. At trip's end, Ortega buries the car, upside down, with its wheels protruding from the soil: the prodigal son, as it were, returned and reconciled to its roots. The Super 8 film record of this transcendent voyage, with its Dadaist denouement, also will be shown as part of REDCAT's installation.

Conceived to function as an organic whole, the trilogy's three parts don't need to be seen in any particular sequence. The deconstructed auto in "Cosmic Thing" is obviously not the same one used in the other two parts. But the "Trilogy" references the different vehicles as if they were all the same character in one single, circular story.

Genial, emotionally open and incorrigibly curious about everything, Ortega enjoys this sort of interplay between orderliness and impulsiveness, or randomness. Many of his works are subtle experiments in the balancing of radically opposed elements to achieve a delicate state of equilibrium.

"I suppose that there is a curiosity between recognizing a certain liberty that I have," he says, "and on the other side, a system that limits, that establishes certain parameters and rules and forms of acting: the fragility and the resistance." That tension, he says,

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can be as much a political and cultural phenomenon as a sculptural and architectural one. "There are many degrees of wrestling with objects and with the public and with materials. It's a constant tension, no?"

Ortega likes keeping his artworks in a state of suspended animation, sometimes literally. The dissected and elevated auto parts of "Cosmic Thing" will be echoed by another element of the REDCAT installation: a disassembled **drum kit** whose pieces will be strung on wires between the gallery walls. When a reporter visited his studio a few weeks ago, Ortega was puzzling over a mock-up of the drum kit installation, occasionally breaking into one of the frequent giggles he emits when something pleases or amuses him. (He began his career as an artist drawing political **cartoons** for Mexico City newspapers.) Around his studio lay several other artworks-in-progress. "Always I'm disorganized," he says. "It's chaotic. It's neurotic. But I think it produces more than order does."

The **drum** installation, which alludes to Bonham's interminable solo, makes the kit's normally inanimate pieces -- drums, cymbals and foot pedals -- look as though they've sprung magically to life or been dynamited into the air in cartoonish slow motion. When the reporter compares them to the maniacal mops that bedevil Mickey Mouse in "The Sorcerer's Apprentice" sequence from Disney's "Fantasia," Ortega giggles again. Yes, he considers, "they are embrujadas" -- **bewitched**.

### Interchangeable parts

CHAOS and sorcery aside, Ortega's thinking and methods are in fact scrupulously disciplined, says REDCAT's Joo. "Damian is very interested in systems. He's really interested in kind of modes of communication and how systems generate information," she observes. As an example, Joo points to "Homos," a 1995 conceptual work in which Ortega paired homonymous images and words to create whimsical but resonant verbal-visual puns. In Ortega's art, words, pictures and

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sounds may function as interchangeable parts of an intricate semiotics. He's constantly on the prowl for cognates and substitutes.

For example, another of Ortega's commissioned pieces for the REDCAT show will be a set of look-alike VW carburetor parts made of concrete. He likes the idea of making a perfect copy of something -- a "pirate" aesthetic, he calls it -- while using different materials to give the work a new context, to create a new idiom from the shell of the old. He compares the carburetor's interlocking components with an organ system inside the **human body**. His artistic philosophy seems to be that if you want to know how something really works or what it means -- a car, a string of words, a society, human memory -- you must take it apart, recast it, then somehow fit the pieces back together.

"That's a really nice thing about Damian's practice as well -- he's very hands-on," Joo says. His methodical, systems-oriented approach to art-making may be one of the things that differentiates Ortega from Gabriel Orozco, probably Mexico's best-known contemporary artist, Joo adds.

But MOCA's Ruiz says that serendipity and improvisation also play a critical role in Ortega's work, as seen in his flexibility in experimenting with different, mostly low-tech materials. "I think this is something that artists who live in countries where things don't always go as expected tend to be more open to," says Ruiz, a native of Guatemala. "Damian talks about the fact that when he was poor he had no money but a lot of time."

Ortega also shows an unusual willingness to acknowledge his dialogue with other artists and artworks, including those of his friend Orozco. Over the past half-dozen or so years, as the global market for contemporary **Mexican art** expanded, so did the pressure on Mexican artists to make something utterly original that would dazzle the critics and collectors. But Ortega allows for his work to be part of a broader cultural

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conversation. Among his recent efforts is a giant, geodesic **skull** made of lightweight wood and covered in patches with thin white paper, which has been on display at a Mexico City **gallery**. The walk-in piece, about the size of an igloo, appears to reference Orozco's "Black Kites" (1997), a human skull decorated with a checkerboard of black diamond shapes drawn with a graphite pencil. "He's always open to the possibility that he's responding to something," Joo says.

It's probably no coincidence that Ortega's oversize papered skull is about the dimensions of a **VW Beetle**, whose design -- engineered but organic, retrograde but futuristic, seedpod and space pod -- suggests a bundle of compacted energy, pregnant with contradictions and possibilities.

In his great "Detroit Industry" murals of the 1930s, Diego Rivera juxtaposed ancient Mesoamerican fertility goddesses with detailed images of the **auto** assembly lines at Henry Ford's River Rouge plant. "The **Beetle** Trilogy" seems to share some of Rivera's ambivalence about the forces of urbanization and industrialization that have radically recast Mexican society, along with the rest of the planet. Is Ortega's trilogy a paean to the Modernist project, a reproach or perhaps a bit of both?

There's no telling how viewers in Los Angeles, the world's auto capital, will react when they finally get to meet the Beetles. But that very sense of uncertainty seems part of what keeps Ortega motoring along, in search of his own upper limits. "It's not easy to discover it," he says of such transforming artistic moments. "But it's very beautiful when it appears."

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Damian Ortega

'The Beetle Trilogy and Other Works'

Where: Museum of Contemporary Art, 250 S. Grand Ave., Los Angeles

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When: Thursday through Jan. 9

Price: \$5 to \$8

Contact: (213) 626-6222; [www.moca.org](http://www.moca.org)

Also

The Gallery at REDCAT, 631 W. 2nd St., Los Angeles; Thursday through Jan. 15; free.  
(213) 237-2800; [www.redcat.org](http://www.redcat.org)