



la maison rouge - fondation antoine de galbert

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mexico: expected/unexpected.

the Isabel and Agustín Coppel collection

curator: Mónica Amor

artistic consultant: Carlos Basualdo

Mexico: expected/unexpected is the sixth private collection to be shown at the maison rouge, and the first to be devoted to a non-European collection, specifically that of Isabel and Agustín Coppel from Culiacán, capital of the state of Sinaloa, Mexico. In a region best known as a centre for drug

trafficking and the scene of violent confrontation between drug barons, the Coppels show a remarkable commitment to their city, using philanthropy to create a "virtuous circle."

At the head of the family business, which started out as a clothing store to gradually expand into mass retail and credit, Agustín Coppel is the driving force behind several urban renewal projects, including the Culiacán botanical gardens. He also supports local art organisations and institutions.

Isabel and Agustín Coppel began their collection of modern and contemporary art some fifteen years ago, and now own around a thousand works. Their collection is very much focused on Mexican artists while remaining open to the global dynamic that feeds the contemporary art world. This duality is deliberately evident in the hundred or so works which the exhibition's curator, Mónica Amor, has chosen. Key figures in modern Mexican art (such as Manuel Álvarez) and contemporary Mexican art (including Gabriel Orozco, Francis Alÿs, Carlos Amorales, Abraham Cruzvillegas and Damián Ortega), are shown with precursors such as Gordon Matta-Clark, Lygia Clark and Ed Ruscha, with the intent of pinpointing possible sources of influence or inspiration. The exhibition also takes in a young generation of international artists, among them Tatiana Trouvé, Rivane Neuenschwander and Terence Koh, whose work echoes Mexicans' intellectual concerns and aesthetic choices.

As requested by the curator, there is no pre-defined order in which to view the works but an invitation to go from one to the other, guided by visual affinities (shadow and light, shapes, structures, techniques) or common themes (urban, nature, death, architecture) to form "micro-narratives that bounce off each other without necessarily reaching a conclusion or denouement." This brochure respects the curator's wish, as much as is possible, by informing on the individual works in a way that is compatible with random viewing.

While the neon signs at the entrance to the foundation are the work of artists who are unrelated to Mexico, the themes they introduce are central to modern Mexicans' concerns: the economy, consumption and relations with the United States. Originally designed as a means of attracting customers, the neon signs shown here deliver a warning to visitors as they step inside the foundation.

The shapes and words which **Doug Aitken** (United States, 1968) represents in his neon sculptures allude to consumer society's dreams and ideals. *99¢ dreams* (2007), in the foundation's facade window, refers to the dollar stores that cater to working-class dreams of possession and abundance. The "American dream" of a better life has disintegrated into a dream of cheap and tawdry goods.

The neon works of South-African artist **Kendell Geers** (born 1968) are more ominous, as they shift from dream to reality. They address questions of violence and repression using a simpler, more direct vocabulary. *B/ORDER* (the B flickers on and off) introduces the notion of frontiers: the physical limits of the exhibition but most of all the border between the United States and Mexico. It also evokes attempts by US patrols to stem illegal immigration.

In the *Meeting Pieces* series, **Jonathan Monk** (United Kingdom, 1969), portrays a real or hypothetical encounter between artist and collector. These "meeting pieces" reinterpret 1960s and 70s conceptual art, in particular text-based performance art. Each piece comprises an invitation to meet, a time and a place, and a document recording the meeting and the sale of the work. Here, an appointment is made for April 21st 2017, on the corner of Goethe and Darwin in Mexico City. Monk's promise to meet highlights a necessary aspect of the art market - the collector's desires and expectations - while questioning the notions of author and authenticity, human and financial exchanges.

For the exhibition at the maison rouge, the Coppels commissioned **Tatiana Trouvé** (1968), an Italian artist based in France, to create a work for the patio. Since 1997, Tatiana Trouvé has devoted herself entirely to one work, the *Bureau d'Activités Implicites* or *BAI*, a matrix that spawns various modules, indeterminate space-time components which produce thoughts and ideas as

much as they record traces of the artist's activity. The work has slowly grown into an autonomous entity that is "governed by a time beyond time."

As is often the case in her work, Trouvé's installation at the maison rouge introduces a complex visual system that plays on the ambiguity between interior and exterior, using reflections in the patio's glass walls to generate confusion between objects and their doubles, both material and immaterial. This is the first work which Tatiana Trouvé has made for outdoor installation. After the exhibition at the maison rouge, it will be reconstructed in the Culiacán botanical gardens. Created twenty years ago, this vast city-centre garden is home to a wealth of exotic plants. Agustín Coppel plans to incorporate specially-commissioned works by contemporary artists into the garden. Some thirty internationally-renowned artists, including Olafur Aliasson, James Turrell and Franz West, are taking part in the project.

The Coppel collection isn't a collection of contemporary Mexican art but a Mexican collection of contemporary art. The Mexican context is there but, as its title suggests, the exhibition aims to shake up preconceived ideas, acknowledging clichés but placing them in a new context. The theme of death, introduced by **Manuel Álvarez Bravo's** (1902-2002) *Niño Maya de Tulum*, showing a young boy next to a bas relief of a skull at the Maya ruins of Tulum, has an important place in Mexican folklore. Death in its most common representations of skulls and skeletons is very much present in Mexican art and crafts, in particular for the Day of the Dead. Álvarez Bravo

warrants equal prominence for his role as a precursor, in Mexico, of an aesthetic that combines attention to form with surrealist accents: two approaches that occur repeatedly throughout the exhibition.

The skull is also part of the visual vocabulary which informs **Carlos Amorales'** (Mexico, 1970) work, *Panorama*. For the past ten years or so, he has assembled a collection of images, either taken from books, magazines and websites or of his own creation, which he then digitally modifies to extract simple outlines in red, black and white. These images compose the *Liquid Archive* that provides him with the material for his drawings, collages, installations, video animations, performances and sculptures. Free association of these images produces constantly new significations.

There is great visual appeal in the lightness and colours of American artist **Pae White's** (born 1963) mobiles. *Frieze Festoon* suggests the garlands and trimmings hung at parties.

The 1920s and 30s saw the emergence, in Mexico, of a new generation of photographers who set out to document the country's cultural traditions. **Álvarez Bravo** is, with Tina Modotti, the master of this generation. He takes a very personal view of his country, its people, traditions, natural, rural and urban environment, while assimilating international currents and in particular surrealism of which he is an exponent. Without any folklorism, and with the

same deep humanistic approach that we find in the work of American photographer **Helen Levitt** (1941), his black and white images depict ordinary, everyday life in Mexico but in such a way that they take on a mysterious charge. Photographs by his pupil and assistant **Graciela Iturbide** (Mexico, 1942) also transform scenes of daily life into mysterious, dream-like images.

Since the late 1990s, the Mexican artist **Iñaki Bonillas** (born 1981) has developed a conceptual work that centres on the technical aspects of photography (conservation temperature, paper colours, the sound of the shutter release, etc.). A collection of some 900 slides, inherited from his grandfather, has provided him with material for various installations since 2003. For *Martín-Lunas*, he has taken pictures of a mystery figure whose face had been systematically covered over in black. He later learned from his grandmother that the person in the photographs had betrayed his grandfather. By trying to eradicate his former friend, the old man has in fact made him the most important figure in the album.

Ventana a los magueyes (1976), Álvarez Bravo's photograph of the kind of whitewashed house that is seen throughout rural Mexico, contrasts with **Ed Ruscha's** icons of suburban America. His *Twentysix Gasoline Stations* (1962) are an inventory of gas stations along Route 66, between Oklahoma and Los Angeles. These are neutral non-compositions, and this detachment and

methodological approach are a foretaste of the anti-aesthetics of conceptual art.



Mexico has many Indian communities who keep their native languages, traditions and beliefs alive. As representative of an authentic Mexican culture, Indians are a favourite subject for photographers such as Álvarez Bravo, Iturbide and **Mariana Yampolsky** (United States, 1925-2002) whose photographs *Adornos*, *Tzintzuntzan*, *Michoacan* show traditional decorations. Indigenous crafts are also central to the work of **Abraham Cruzvillegas** (Mexico, 1968). Between 1995 and 1997, he lived with Indian communities in the state of Michoacán where he learned their crafts. He then adapted their techniques to Mexican contemporary art. *Unión* (2003) is a long string of

coloured beads and seeds, arranged according to the Fibonacci sequence. *Progreso* (2003) transforms minimalism's spiral into a mobile, constructed from golf tees, Moroccan flowers and balls of beeswax.

British artist **Melanie Smith** (born 1965) moved to Mexico in 1989. In 2002 she began the *Spiral City* project: aerial views of Mexico City whose energy and "visual saturation" fascinate her. The photographs were taken from a helicopter flying in a spiral, a direct reference to Robert Smithson's 1970 work, *Spiral Jetty*.

Tercerunquinto (literally, "a third of a fifth") is a collective formed in Monterrey, Mexico, in 1996 by Julio Castro (Monterrey, 1976), Gabriel Cázares (Monterrey, 1978) and Rolando Flores (Monterrey, 1975). Its work addresses the definition of space and its uses, creating "architectonic implants" whose purpose is to alter the dynamics of places, in particular through the disjunction of public and private space. The site chosen by the collective for *Escultura pública en la periferia urbana de Monterrey* is an area on the outskirts of Monterrey where clusters of improvised, ramshackle houses have sprung up. Tercerunquinto introduced a concrete slab (concrete is a rare resource in these areas) which has become a space for the entire community to use, for example as a hairdressing salon or marketplace. The project is illustrated here by drawings, photographs and other documents.

Francis Alÿs (born 1959) is a Belgian artist who has lived in Mexico since the early 1980s. Mexico City is the subject of a body of work that spans installations, videos, photographs, drawings, performances and painting. His walks through the city are a chance to glean elements and anecdotes which he then transforms into stories and chronicles that shed light on the social phenomena and activity of the places visited. In *Zócalo*, a twelve-hour long video, made with Rafael Ortega, he films the constant coming and going of passers-by and street vendors who seek out the shade of the flagpole which supports the national flag in the centre of the city's main square. This urban choreography, filmed from an unusual vantage point, takes on a mysterious dimension, as though part of some occult ritual.

Set alongside the luxuriant and idyllic nature which **Thomas Struth** (Germany, 1954) depicts in *Paradise 2*, **Lothar Baumgarten's** (Germany, 1944) enigmatic photographs, in which nature appears to have covered the vestiges of an ancient civilisation, appear as vanities.

Gabriel Orozco is no doubt one of the best-known Mexican artists on the international scene, as well as one whose hugely eclectic work is hardest to grasp. This diversity is well represented here. Widely-travelled, Orozco is the author of numerous photographs which are more records of a given moment than aesthetically-intended images. His *Cementerio 2* series was taken in a cemetery in Mali. Bowls of food and water are left on the graves for the

deceased in a rare evocation of a human presence which is otherwise completely absent from his work. *Gato en la jungle* (1992) gives another, tongue-in-cheek vision of nature, rearranged as images on supermarket tins.

Like Cruzvillegas, the Brazilian artist **Rivane Neuenschwander** (1967) works with organic materials in a process she herself describes as "ethereal materialism." The empty garlic bulbs of *Suspended Landscape* (1997) imperceptibly move as visitors walk by. *One Thousand and One Possible Nights* (2006) is a series of collages using confetti made by punching holes in a Portuguese translation of *The Arabian Nights*. Each story is randomly strewn on a black background, transforming the narrative into a starry sky or map of the heavens.

Maruch Sántiz Gomez (Mexico, 1975) is a member of the Tzotzil tribe (Chiapas region) whose language she speaks. Through these images of her native village, Sántiz Gomez explores and describes the local culture and its fusion with Spanish and pre-Hispanic traditions. Her work is part of the *Archivo Fotográfico Indígena*, which since 1995 has shown work by photographers from various Chiapas ethnic groups on their traditions and roots. Here, in what could be described as an inventory in memory of the present, images of ordinary objects illustrate indigenous beliefs, written in tzotzil.

Gabriel Orozco began a cycle of works in the early 1990s which explores combinations of spheres and ellipses in a discrete number of colours. He combines these in patterns based on a knight's moves in a game of chess. Originally using banknotes and plane tickets as media, the cycle now includes small paintings, three of which - *Cuadro fértil* (2004), *Árbol simétrico* (2006) and *Árbol nuevo* (2006) - can be seen in the exhibition. They combine formalistic considerations with a wider interest in geometry, mathematics and philosophy (particularly the atomist doctrine).

Invoking John Cage, **Fernando Ortega** (Mexico, 1971) proposes works that modify our perceptions and invite us to take time to contemplate by slowing down moments from the endless flow of life. In *Colibri inducido a un sueño profundo* (2006), he worked with an ornithologist to create an abnormal state for this endlessly-hovering bird. The image of the humming-bird at rest, which would be impossible to observe in nature, is superimposed on the noises that float up from the street and into the artist's studio in downtown Mexico City.

Since his early works in the 1990s, the photographs of **Rineke Dijkstra** (Netherlands, 1969) have focused on the human form, and specifically models at a critical period in their life (teenagers, young mothers) or at a time of great emotional intensity, as in the *Montemor, Portugal* series from 1994. Far from the usual glamorous images, these portraits of matadors were taken

immediately after they had left the bullring, still smeared with sand and blood. They capture the dramatic intensity of the moment, torn between tension and exhaustion, pride and vulnerability.

The installations, videos and sound works of **Jorge Méndez Blake** (Guadalajara, 1974) explore the relationship between classical literature, art and contemporary culture. The two works shown here refer back to *El llano en llamas* (*The Burning Plain*), a collection of short stories by the Mexican author Juan Rufo (1917-1986), published in 1953. In *Diles que no me maten* (2004), Méndez Blake has edited a recording of Rufo reading his story so that only one sentence remains. Devoid of any narrative context, repetition and silence give the plea – tell them not to kill me - intense dramatic tension.

Ana Mendieta (Cuba 1948 – New York 1985) produced her first "silhouettes" (1973-1980) while on her first visit to Mexico, in Oaxaca. *Anima, silueta de cohetes* (1976) is taken from this series, in which Mendieta imprints her body, or its outline, in nature using stones, mud, flowers, etc. In the feminist context of the 1970s, this symbolic and physical return to earth was seen as evoking mother-goddess worship and its rituals. Mendieta's art also alludes to the Afro-Cuban santería religion and its orishas, through which the artist recalls her Cuban origins. Her use of blood in actions that relate to purification and rebirth, such as *Blood and Feathers* and *Sweating Blood*, refer to santería animistic rituals.

Flor Garduño's (Mexico, 1957) photograph also evokes a ritual action. It is part of the *Testigos de tiempo* series, which in 1992 brought together images of indigenous people from all over Latin America, photographed in their daily life.

The influence of 1970s body art is evident in the performances of the Chinese-Canadian artist **Terence Koh**. Under the alias asianpunkboy, he puts himself at the centre of spectacular and often provocative performances. The skeleton and mirrors of *Skeleton Painting*, splashed with paint, body fluids and wax, are all that remain of a 2006 performance which can be seen on the accompanying video. This extract opens with graphic representations of skulls to symbolically end with a macabre dance with shamanic undertones.

Carefully-folded botanical "cribs" compose *Sanfoninha*, a delicate sculpture by the Brazilian artist **Marepe** (born 1970). Like Tatiana Trouvé's installation in the patio, **Pedro Reyes'** (Mexico, 1972) work is also part of the Coppel's project for the Culiacán botanical garden. Building on the contrast between the calm and beauty that reign inside the garden, and the violence that prevails outside its walls, the creative process behind Pedro Reyes' work is the catalyst for social transformation. Culiacán has the most shooting deaths in all western Mexico, as a result of which the Sinaloa state government campaigned for residents to hand in their guns for destruction. This truce inspired Reyes for *Palas por Pistolas*. Five videos (made by Rafael Ortega) show the different stages in transforming 1,527 guns into spades. These spades will be presented

to museums and other institutes around the world, on condition they are used to plant trees. One of the spades will be given to the maison rouge which, for the exhibition closing, will stage a performance in the gardens of the Bassin de l'Arsenal.

Facing *Palas por Pistolas*, **Miguel Calderon's** (Mexico, 1972) video work in the maison rouge café – the perfect place to gather and watch a soccer match – borrows the aesthetics and strategies of popular culture, particularly those of the media, to take a scathing look at Mexico. In 2004, Calderon was invited to represent Mexico at the São Paulo Biennial, where he showed *Mexico vs Brazil*: the video of the now mythical match which the Mexicans won by 17 goals to nil. His work is also a tongue-in-cheek reference to the heightened national sentiment that sport can inspire, and which is also present in contemporary art with its biennials and national pavilions. Next to it is a diptych by **John Baldessari** (born 1931), one of the most influential figures in American West Coast contemporary art. Reworked images, in photography, cinema and television, are recurrent in his work. He inserts painted shapes and silhouettes into existing photographs to neutralise the narrative and create a new enigmatic image.

Mexico City (1998) is part of the *Streetwork* series of photographs, taken by **Philip-Lorca diCorcia** (United States, 1951) between 1996 and 1998 in major world cities. As always in his work, the line between fiction and reality is blurred. The people in his photographs may have been snapped unawares, the

resultant images still appear to have been carefully staged, using passers-by as extras and the city as a backdrop. Here, the central figure seems to be the woman with a shopping bag. However, other figures also populate the image. They are the street vendors who are a fixture of Mexican towns and cities, and who reappear in a work by Alÿs, shown in the adjoining room.

This evocation of the streets ends with a wall-bound work by **Kendell Geers**. Barely decipherable in highly ornamental Gothic lettering, the word "fuck" makes reference to urban culture and its violence.

As visitors enter the next space, they are confronted with a stuffed donkey by the Italian artist **Maurizio Cattelan** (1960). Many of Cattelan's works use stuffed animals in human positions. In the United States, Mexican workers are often caricatured as donkeys.

SI, SI, SI (1995), the Spanish-language word sculpture by **Jack Pierson**, articulates both form and meaning by using letters in the colours of the Mexican flag. **Jorge Méndez Blake** also evokes Mexico in *Untitled (the plain is still burning)*. He changes the title of Juan Rulfo's collection of short stories to show, with humour, how little Mexico has changed since Rulfo's book.

Francis Alÿs compiled his work, *Ambulantes* (1992-2002), from slides of vendors, pushing and pulling all manner of contraptions through the streets of Mexico City. It documents the social reality of urban Mexico.

Images by **William Eggleston** (United States, 1937) and **Orozco**, showing the beauty of the everyday, flank **Dan Graham's** (United States 1942) famous *Homes for America* series, a photographic essay on tract housing in the state of New Jersey, where he grew up.



Since the early 1990s, **Alÿs** has produced several series in which he gives some of Mexico's many *rotulistas* or sign-painters simple works to copy or interpret, which he then reinterprets himself. Notions of author, inspiration and authenticity - essential criteria for the art market when evaluating a work - are lost in this back-and-forth process. *Untitled (Cityscape)* (1995-1996) shows Alÿs' original with its variations, while *La Ronde* (1998-2006) - a circle of anonymous men, each drawing on the back of the man in front of them, with

no way of knowing where the process starts and ends - metaphorically depicts Alÿs' method while documenting his creative process.

Damián Ortega (Mexico, 1967) came to public attention at the 2003 Venice Biennial with *Cosmic Thing*, a Volkswagen Beetle, a symbol of mass production and Mexico's westernisation, which he dismantled and suspended, piece by piece, in space. *Expanded Geometry* (2005) is a new iteration of this idea of transforming an ordinary object so as to suggest its potential to become something else. The exploded drum kit has a comic-strip quality, where a drawing captures a significant moment in a temporal sequence.

In *Bonampak News* (2006), **Lugo** brings together ancient and modern Mexico. Bonampak was the name of a pre-Hispanic site. Crumpled and discarded on the floor, newspaper written in Mayan hieroglyphic script synthesises the big and the small picture, daily happenings and legend.

Biombo by **Ortega** is inspired by a collage of photographs of Philadelphia sidewalks, which the artist has reproduced in his studio and used in a vertical composition.

The flags in *Grand Hotel* (2005) by **Pablo Vargas Lugo** (born 1968) are those which luxury hotels fly in honour of VIP guests, except that here they are torn and shredded. This work echoes the Mexican flag by **Enrique Guzmán** (1952-1986), who played an important role in reviving surrealist-influenced figurative

painting in Mexican art of the 1960s and 70s. In *¡Oh! Santa Bandera*, he replaces the insignia on the national flag with a wide-open mouth.

All the works in the lower-level room explore architectural forms and processes. **Gordon Matta-Clark** (1948-1978) stands out as a highly influential figure, in particular for what he defined as Anarchitecture, a practice of sectioning and removing parts of abandoned buildings and resuscitating them before their final destruction. Of the works shown here as photographs or videos, *Conical Intersect* is the most emblematic. It was produced in 1974, during construction work on the Georges Pompidou Centre in Paris, as a series of cuts made in a neighbouring condemned building. It forms a non-monumental and ephemeral counterpoint to the future "temple of culture."

Lygia Clark (1920-1988) and **Hélio Oiticica** (1937-1980) are both exponents of Brazilian Neoconcretism of the late 1950s. They advocated a new approach to abstraction, based on experimentation, the artist's subjective view, and the viewer's own experience. In *Metasquema*, Oiticica uses geometric shapes to explore the inherent qualities of painting: colour, media and the illusionistic space created by the different planes. Clark's *Bichos* of the early 1960s represented a move into three-dimensional space. Each *Bicho* comprises metal plates, joined by hinges, which were originally made to be picked up and handled.

Several of **Orozco's** works, such as *Total Perception* and *Center of the Universe*, show his interest in geometry as a spontaneous occurrence in human activity. *Soccer Ball 2* is at the junction of two series of works by the artist, who has cut his formal devices of circles and lines into the leather of an old deflated football.

Vulnerabilia (2005) by **Jonathan Hernández** (Mexico, 1972) is a large collage of newspaper photographs, presented with no further explanation. Together they form a visual essay on the notion of vulnerability and how it is represented in the media in contexts such as war, sport or natural disasters. The theme of ruins in this collage echoes Matta-Clark's work.

Like Matta-Clark, **Ricardo Rendón** (Mexico, 1970) takes over existing architectural space using standard building materials, such as wood and plasterboard, and basic construction techniques (carpentry, bricklaying, etc.). Using a process made obvious by the left-over pieces scattered on the floor, *Muro Falso* (2008) is a temporary, site-specific installation for the maison rouge. It transforms a blank wall into a pure geometric abstraction.

Neuenschwander also appropriates the pure forms of concrete art in *Canteiros / Conversations and Constructions* (2006). Various foodstuffs are transformed into elaborate compositions, inspired by modern or utopian architectural monuments.

The majority of **Simon Starling's** (United Kingdom, 1967) works examine the production, in a globalised context, of design objects inspired by traditional crafts. *Four Thousand Seven Hundred and Twenty Five (Motion Control / Mollino)* (2007) is a 35mm film which details a wooden chair by the architect Carlo Mollino (Turin, 1905-1973), inspired by the furniture found in northern Italian rural communities. Craft-inspired modern design is portrayed using techniques associated with industrial films.

The exhibition ends in the basement with a video installation by **Damián Ortega**. *Moby Dick* is the second work in *The Beetle Trilogy* whose protagonist is a Volkswagen Beetle, a car which first appeared in Mexico in the 1960s. *Moby Dick* is the recording of a cathartic performance in Mexico in 2004 during which a rock band jams to the Led Zeppelin song *Moby Dick* while Ortega and others pull on ropes that are attached to the car, as though struggling to restraint a wild beast.