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Installation view of **PEDRO GÓMEZ-EGAÑA**'s *Sleipnir*, 2018, mixed-media installation, dimensions variable, at Yarat Contemporary Art Centre, Baku, 2018–19. All photos by Fakhriyya Mammadova; courtesy Yarat; copyright the artist.

SLEIPNIR PEDRO GÓMEZ-EGAÑA

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Pedro Gómez-Egaña's explorations of memory, myth and space are known for their experiential layers presented through purpose-built sculptures, objects and sound environments. *Sleipnir* (2018), on view at Baku's Yarat Contemporary Art Centre, is the artist's latest site-specific work from his ongoing "Observatory" series of multisensory installations. In this work, the Copenhagen- and Bergen-based, Colombian artist delves into a theoretical cultural and mythological link between Norway and Azerbaijan through a massive installation of a pavilion created at the intersection of three elements: Jorge Luis Borges's 1945 short story "The Aleph," about an eponymous point in space through which everything in the universe can be seen simultaneously; the Norse mythology of the wise god Mimir, whose severed head serves as a guide for Odin; and the writings of Norwegian ethnographer Thor Heyerdahl, who hypothesized that the Scandinavian people originated from what is now Azerbaijan, based on what appear to be ancient rock carvings of Viking ships throughout the country. Though Heyerdahl's theory lacks any scientific basis, he was popular in both the Soviet Union and the West for his attempts to bridge ostensibly disparate civilizations through imagining possible points of shared knowledge and culture. Deftly navigating and connecting these numerous thematic strands, Gómez-Egaña's work is aptly named after Odin's eight-legged horse, which some have claimed might be more accurately conceptualized as a metaphorical ship, or a giant scorpion.



Installation view of PEDRO GÓMEZ-EGAÑA's *Sleipnir*, 2018, mixed-media installation, dimensions variable, at Yarat Contemporary Art Centre, Baku, 2018–19.

With reference to its namesake, *Sleipnir* features eight black legs suspended from the top of a large red pavilion, which is spacious enough to encase eight people for the duration of the ten-minute sound performance within the structure that mingles Gómez-Egaña's narration and a composition drawing from traditional Norwegian and Azerbaijani folk music. Black dividers inside the pavilion separate the participants, who are immersed in complete darkness, barring moments of filtered light emerging through small windows manipulated to the rhythm of the soundtrack. Eight assistants engage in their own performance of signaling to one another as they operate the large, black, exterior levers that open and close the pavilion, which in turn are connected to wires that extend across the ceiling and down the pavilion walls, suspending metal spheres that softly and rhythmically thud against the structure. Inside the pavilion, the levers can be heard groaning against the structure as they move, evoking the sensation that one is within the hull of a ship, on a journey through autobiographically-inspired recollections of people and places that appear in the artist's narration. His tale is of the desire not only to see but also to control and consume the entire world at once, revealing in the end the shortcomings of such endeavors. Incorporating excerpts from the texts that inspired the piece, Gómez-Egaña explains how Odin wished to possess all of the wisdom contained in Mimir's head and

finds parallels with Borges's *Aleph*, a symbol for man's arrogant ambition to understand the universe in its entirety. This desire is manifested in a fictional house built by the narrator's father for his mother on a private island, in total isolation from the world—a dream that is recast as a nightmare when the island is overrun with scorpions and the family is haunted by the creatures, suffering for the father's hubris.

Emerging from the pavilion at the end of the surreal and ruminative experience, the metronome-like rhythm of the metal spheres on the walls seem to remind us of time's eternal and indifferent passage. *Sleipnir* thus straddles reality and myth, presenting them to be interpreted by the viewer through the lens of their own experience and recollections. *Sleipnir* serves as a cautionary tale about the price of the fantasy—if we want everything, we must be prepared to accept the bad with the good; the scorpions lurking in paradise.

Pedro Gómez-Egaña's "*Sleipnir*" is on view at Yarat Contemporary Art Centre, Baku, until February 24, 2019.

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