



SURTIDA \$32
RETAZO \$20
PECHUGA \$65
PIERNAS \$10

CARNICERIA
"EL POTRERO"
SR. JESUS
LUIS Y EDUARDO
CAL 200
210

Abraham Cruzvillegas at the Mercado de la Bola in Mexico City, 2015.

Self-Built Man

A south-of-the-
border odyssey
with Abraham
Cruzvillegas

By MICHAEL SLENSKE

“I’M SORRY,”

Abraham Cruzvillegas shouts—half-apologetic, but slightly smirking, over the bleating horns of a mariachi band as we descend into the Cumbia-fueled chaos of Mercado de La Bola. As it happens, this geodesic-domed bazaar on the southern edge of Mexico City was cofounded by his mother, Angeles Fuentes, 43 years ago to the day. However, Cruzvillegas—whose first name is pronounced “ah-bram”—had no idea that was the case when we set out on this impromptu visit to his childhood stomping grounds in Ajusco. The former lava-dome-turned-favela-turned-thriving-barrio on the southern edge of the city was built by migrants who used the native volcanic rocks (and anything else they could find) to carve out a neighborhood—filled with “aesthetic promiscuity,” in his words—that sits atop the highest point in the Distrito Federal. Like Ajusco, La Bola is a dizzying labyrinth, packed tight with *carniceros* pushing blanket-sized flanks of chicharon and mini hierberias offering bundles of magic candles and cans of coconut-scented “money spray.”

“These are remedies for love, business, protection for the house,” says Cruzvillegas, pointing out products as we follow his mother around the dense market. A Marxist-minded community organizer who once served as an intermediary between these same vendors and the government, Fuentes also maintained her own stall, selling uniforms and women’s undergarments. Given her rock-star status with this group, his mother can’t turn a corner on this festive anniversary without someone embracing her or looking to snap a photo. Beyond the market, Fuentes and her late husband, artist Rogelio Cruzvillegas, were also leaders in the local Autoconstrucción (or “self-building”) movement—which they later discussed in compelling (and competing) interviews in a titular video work by their son—that helped develop the neighborhood and subsequently influenced nearly every sculpture, painting, and installation Cruzvillegas has made over the past quarter century.

The artist’s upbringing has influenced his practice in countless ways. “My parents used to say, ‘You deserve nothing, you have to work.’ It was always about work, not about luck or chance,” Cruzvillegas tells me in the car an hour later while driving a few miles from Ajusco to the National Autonomous University of Mexico (UNAM), where he studied art and pedagogy. From his father, he absorbed the maker’s bug and a political stance, of a sort: “I remember my father telling me, ‘We’re not rich, not proletariat. We have no class. We don’t belong to that program. We’re not part of those ideas.’” Cruzvillegas recalls.

This outsider status—honed in a world that created itself from nothing, where one man’s junk is literally another man’s treasure—allowed Cruzvillegas to develop an inimitable aesthetic. His work riffs on Alexander Calder, Robert Smithson, French Fluxus icon Robert Filliou, and Buckminster Fuller, among others, but does so with unusual materials such as sheep dung, ground corn, beer bottles, feathers, and bowling balls. His bricolaged installations are constructed on-site, oftentimes with things—discarded furniture, paintings of the

Last Supper, a duvet printed with the image of a tiger—that he asks local curators to source for him. At first glance the work might call to mind the practices of Sarah Sze, Jessica Stockholder, or even Jason Rhoades. However, Cruzvillegas infuses his work with personal narratives and organic improvisations that push political and formalist concerns to the razor’s edge of instability, and in so doing have made him one of the world’s most in-demand artists, with representation by Mexico City’s Kurimanzutto, London’s Thomas Dane Gallery, Paris’s Galerie Chantal Crousel, and L.A.’s Regen Projects, which opens “Autoconciación,” its second solo show with the artist, on September 17.

Outside of the gallery system, Cruzvillegas also produces scene-stealing installations at biennials and museums. He exhibited a wooden block stuck with dozens of machetes and a flash kit umbrella festooned with peacock and pheasant feathers in a Gabriel Orozco-curated pavilion at the 2003 Venice Biennale. For Documenta (13), he took to the streets of Kassel with a set of Mikado sticks—painted to correspond to 34 concepts taken from his own writings (self-constructed; handmade; written/told; a blind date)—and played the game in different parts of the city, erecting impromptu, no-budget sculptures by following the commands of the last three sticks he picked up. Last fall he inaugurated the Hyundai Commission at Tate Modern’s Turbine Hall in London with *Empty Lot*, a massive installation featuring 23 tons of soil samples sourced from 34 different local parks, planted in 240 triangular garden boxes lit by handmade lamps that encouraged all manner of vegetation. The latter project proved controversial among London critics—the *Guardian* called it a “frustrating” work with “too much going on,” and likened it to “an allotment in winter—with the slight air of a displacement camp.” But Cruzvillegas reveled in the chaos, and claims that he intended *Empty Lot* to be a more polemical, unmanicured piece that subverts the ideas expressed in Walter De Maria’s intentionally lifeless *The New York Earth Room*. The scaffolding that supported the sprouting boxes, he says, was more important than the soil contained therein. “Many times I refer to my work metaphorically as scaffolding—a thing you can easily dismantle and reuse, that takes different shapes in different spaces according to specific needs,” he ventures.

The Tate commission was certainly not the first time that Cruzvillegas incorporated organic material into his work, nor would it be the last. At his “Autoconciación” show at Toronto’s Scrap Metal Gallery this past summer, Cruzvillegas suspended a series of miniature sculptures from the ceiling—skate park elements festooned with meats, a taxidermied duck from a local thrift shop, and a pair of work boots. For his Regen Projects show this month, he worked with an L.A.-based botanist to curate a selection of Angeleno plants that will sit atop iron structures welded to a very personal series of readymades: the back seats from the same models of cars—including an old Opel Rekord P1, a 1969

OPPOSITE:
Installation view
of “Abraham
Cruzvillegas: The
Autoconstrucción
Suites” at the
Walker Art Center in
Minneapolis, 2013.

BELOW:
Indio, 1997.
Installation of 7,800
Indio beer bottles.



ABRAHAM CRUZVILLEGAS AND KURIMANZUTTO, MEXICO CITY



Ford Galaxie wagon, and a 1980s Renault 5—that his parents owned when he was a boy.

That’s a characteristically autobiographical touch, drawn from what Cruzvillegas calls “prime matter,” but his practice utilizes personal history more as medium than subject. The artist has been mining familial memories for years, from his mother’s political activism to his neighborhood’s social concerns to the archive of his late father, a Purépecha Indian who was educated in a Franciscan boarding school and later became a monk in the cloisters (Guadalupe, Zacatecas, San Francisco, Monterrey, Tijuana, Zapopan, México City), learning Latin, Greek, painting, woodcarving, gold-leafing, and how to play 12 musical instruments. For the last quarter century of his life, he was bound to a wheelchair battling muscular dystrophy while trying semi-successfully to reconnect with his indigenous roots.

As a student, Cruzvillegas made his earliest conceptual works by deconstructing his father’s own landscape, still-life, and historical paintings—stacking them under junk Dada assemblages, folding them over handrails, or recreating a version

of Duchamp’s *Bicycle* with one of Rogelio’s floral studies fitted into the wheel’s rim. When the appropriation of his father’s work became “too psychoanalytical,” Cruzvillegas began to investigate the outer limits of form and function within the language of art history, even though his first artistic efforts were quite humble.

Cruzvillegas actually cut his teeth as a cartoonist. His comic strips—including collaborations with his oldest friend and fellow sculptor Damián Ortega—ran in local publications like *La Jornada* and *El Universal*. Cruzvillegas’s semiautobiographical character Arqueles Cuesta—named after the early 20th-century Mexican poets Arqueles Vela and Jorge Cuesta and the insisting plea *qué les cuesta?*—was a serially unemployed punk-poet who bounced from one job to another, including shoeshiner, journalist, artist, politician, and *taquero*.

“He did one cartoon for *La Jornada* where Arqueles Cuesta gets a haircut and the barber, who represents the System, shaves his head,” recalls Ortega, who met Cruzvillegas at a Botellita de Jerez concert in Librería Gandhi (the Mexican analogue to Barnes & Noble) when they were

“ I’ve been able to construct a platform that I can use freely for any circumstance, any situation, any place. ”



Tierra de gigantes,
1989. Oil and soil
on canvas,
15¾ x 23¾ in.

BELOW, FROM LEFT:
Studio ephemera;
personal materials
ready to be
painted for one of
Cruzvillegas's "Blind
Self-Portrait" works.



CLOCKWISE FROM TOP: ABRAHAM CRUZVILLEGAS AND KURIMANZUTTO; TWO IMAGES, MICHAEL SLENSKE

both still in high school. “It included a caricature of the Mexican president, Carlos Salinas de Gortari. The government called the newspaper and said, ‘You can’t make fun of the president anymore after this.’ *La Jornada* saved one copy for Abraham and one for the president and the rest were burned.”

In 1987, while studying at UNAM, Ortega invited Cruzvillegas to the Tlalpan home of Gabriel Orozco, who had just returned home from Spain. (Ortega and Orozco knew each other because their fathers were friends in the Communist Party.) When Ortega wanted to learn more about Minimalism, Pop, and the growing international art scene, Orozco served as the de facto professor for a group that also included conceptual sculptor Gabriel Kuri and Mexican artist and tattoo pioneer Dr. Lakra. They held a series of informal salons that met every week for the next four years—known as the *Taller de los Viernes* (or Friday Workshops)—to share works, exchange ideas, criticism, books, and a few cervezas. “That was our real art education,” says Cruzvillegas of the arrangement, which has since earned comparisons to England’s YBAs and the Modernists of 1920s Paris. Those sprawling social sessions also formed the heart of Mexico City powerhouse gallery Kurimanzutto’s stable long before it had a brick-and-mortar location.

Emboldened by his newfound community of peers in Mexico City, Cruzvillegas began to develop a body of work that made ample use of humor, unconventional materials, and references both sociopolitical and art historical. In 1997, he filled a room at the now shuttered Art & Idea with 7,800 bottles of Indio beer, a reflection on Indian stereotypes, segregation and “the extreme poverty of indigenous peoples.” He translated indigenous crafts from Michoacan (his father’s birthplace) into conceptual hacks throughout the late ’90s—Smithson corners rendered in stone-ground corn, for instance. In 1999 he used Johannes Itten’s color theory to paint his Renault 5, later baking a cake commemorating the car’s transformation; and his video debut, *Milagro: transformación del jugo en jugo*, 2000, finds him drinking orange juice in a nod to Harry Smith’s mid 1980s milk-pouring performance.

While these hat tips to icons were increasingly successful, an emotional weight fell upon the artist in 2004: After being moved to tears by a visit to Rio’s Mangueira Samba school, where Hélio Oiticica used to dance, Cruzvillegas realized he was “overusing the language of art” and returned to his Mexico City studio unsettled. He began painting everything—from his tools to his fridge—green and pink, the colors of the school. “I wanted to cancel,” he says. “I wanted to question again who I am, and why I’m doing things this way.”

Cruzvillegas moved to Paris for a residency at Atelier Calder directly after his samba school epiphany, and spent the next four years in the city going to every political demonstration he could find. That led to his blackboard paintings—“I was writing and erasing every day,” he says. “Properly, it was a black period.” These were made by applying blackboard paint to food crates and boxes collected from the streets, markets, and dumpsters, upon

which he scrawled in chalk slogans from the Parisian demonstrations, erasing these and replacing with song lyrics, sentences from his notebooks, or quotations from Maurice Blanchot’s philosophical texts (only to erase everything all over again). The artist went on to create his “Blind Self-Portraits” series by accumulating the paper trails (business cards, news and porn clippings, parking tickets, pharmaceutical scripts) from his vagabond, post-studio-session peregrinations, which he turns over to his collaborator and former student Martin Nuñez, a professional skateboarder-cum-conceptual artist and painter whose family home and studio in Guadalupe Tepeyac serves as Cruzvillegas’s main production facility.

Nuñez’s task is to organize these documents “by size and theme,” the artist’s collaborator explained to me during a tour of the space earlier this year. “It’s precise, but the mistake is what’s beautiful in these pieces.” After creating an infrastructure from these papers, Nuñez paints the backsides of each document in various colors. They’re then affixed, face-first, to gallery or museum walls using simple pushpins. The teasing nature of these works—further complicated by the fact that Cruzvillegas sometimes jokes about painting blank pieces of paper among the personally loaded ephemera—can drive collectors crazy, to the point where they’ll attempt to sneakily peek behind the painted veils

Cruzvillegas admits that his dealers can have a hard time moving his more delicate work at fairs—not that this bothers him much. The artist is only reluctantly complicit with a market

that craves easily digestible objects from its blue-chip players. And just as he doesn’t want to be defined by any singular, readily definable output, he also is loath to subscribe to any concept of an iconic personal style, preferring instead the possibilities afforded an anonymous chameleon. (“He can look like a zen master calligrapher or a ninja fighter, and the next week he’s rockabilly or punk rock or a character from *Breaking Bad*,” notes Orozco.) During the Tate opening Cruzvillegas favored black overcoats, colorful scarves, and a thick mohawk, but when he greets me this past June at his loft-like, turn-of-the-century villa in Tacubaya that he shares with his wife and two children—right across the street from where his mother was raised—he’s dressed smartly in a white Nehru collar shirt, zoot-suitish wool trousers, suspenders, and an elegant pair of white huaraches from Nayarit. If it weren’t for the gold gauge earrings, you might picture him walking out of a Diego Rivera painting.

Cruzvillegas points out the entryway’s floor, which sports a dividing wall hewn from weathered wood blocks and beer-bottle caps, and pink and green tiles that he designed with abstracted swastika forms. (Over the years Cruzvillegas and his longtime friend and Kurimanzutto stablemate Dr. Lakra, with

Wheel Deal

For the past four years, Abraham Cruzvillegas has collaborated with his long-time friend and former student Martin Nuñez in the multi-level home that the latter’s grandfather erected in Mexico City’s Guadalupe Tepeyac barrio more than eight decades ago. Nuñez, a former professional skateboarder, incorporates the sport into his surrealist paintings, which feature everything from chimpanzees to *Little Prince*-style thrashers. (Meanwhile, his old boards are recycled into rolling assemblage sculptures and totems.) He also helps a popular skateboard brand, Lúdica (or “Leisure”), whose decks feature his sci-fi-inflected creatures or the occasional portrait of Bas Jan Ader, one of the artist’s conceptualist heroes. Nuñez

and Cruzvillegas may soon take to the streets of Los Angeles (or another to-be-determined urban art hub) with a series of improvised ramps and transitions made for an unrealized skate performance originally intended for Toronto’s Scrap Metal Gallery. “The tool is Martin’s skateboard, and

he’s carving matter in space,” explains Cruzvillegas, who also plans to exhibit his protege’s work at a Mexico City dive bar as part of a forthcoming curatorial project sited in local taverns. “For me, Martin means hope,” he adds. “He’s the kind of person who makes me think things can change for the better.”



Skateboard decks with art by Cruzvillegas collaborator Martin Nuñez.

“Cruzvillegas has developed an extraordinary system of **sensual and urban awareness** that casually elevates everyday poor objects to sublime status, and supposedly conspicuous third world traditions into the realms of cosmogonic revelations,” says curator **Guillermo Santamarina Lagunes**, a long time friend, who has collaborated on various shows with the artist over the years. “The works explore new levels of **psychological welfare**, revolution, the reinterpretation of so called historical truths, and the elevation of **Dada** from its postmodern ghetto.”

whom he’s collaborating on a series of hand-painted Mezcal bottles, have been studying the origins and symbolic meanings of the politically fraught symbol, including its roots in Mayan culture and Zen Buddhism.) Elsewhere in the house there’s a wall of political posters dating back to 1968 (from a series Cruzvillegas printed for a mid-career survey at the Walker Art Center in 2013). A wall rubbing that David Hammons made during a dinner party is perhaps the most telling work in the room. “He’s one of my gurus,” Cruzvillegas says. “For him, politically, it’s necessary to find precise things that mean something—but in my case it’s different. I don’t need that emblematic use of things that point to a specific political, historical, or economic circumstance.”

After driving from Cruzvillegas’s house to UNAM, he takes me on a short hike up a hill where he’s been busy making a public sculpture, part of his ongoing “Reconstrucción” series. This piece joins other works labeled variously as “Autodestrucción,” “Autoconfusión,” and “Autocontusión.” Ideas of building and demolition are always at play in his practice: “Sometimes I say that in order to make a door you need to destroy a wall,” he said in an interview in a forthcoming book about *Empty Lot*. “In order to make a house, people transform and modify their spaces, destroying and rearranging according to specific needs, permanently. That’s what I do with my work, with my own identity.”

At UNAM, Cruzvillegas is in the midst of constructing a wall atop an existing 10-meter-high barrier of volcanic rock, an unfinished mistake of sorts initiated by the university in the 1950s, which cuts through some 300 meters of UNAM’s botanical garden. While in today’s Trump-mad climate a large wall might seem like controversial territory for a Mexican artist, the work is actually about material contradictions, not border politics.

Cruzvillegas and his team have been unearthing vegetation-covered concrete and garbage from demolished buildings around the campus, which have been buried under huge mounds in the ecological site. Though he’s still got some 270 meters to go and estimates there is another 1,000 tons of material to work with, he’s not sure the next university president will let him finish, and that’s okay with him.

Looking over the unfinished project, rising above the university’s unfinished wall, Cruzvillegas is struck by a sense of wonderment. “The moment we are living in our society is all about destruction, corruption, abuse, and violence,” says Cruzvillegas. “I’m not optimistic, but I’m hopeful. It’s not that I want to be the good one—I’m not—but I don’t want to be part of that. How do you start things without hope?” MP





Untitled, 1993.
Mixed media,
59 x 31½ x 16½ in.

OPPOSITE:
A work in
progress from
"Reconstrucción"
at the Universidad
Nacional Autónoma
de México, 2016.