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Neither Land Nor Sea: A Q&A with Jose Dávila



Installation view of "Jose Dávila: Stones Don't Move" at Sean Kelly, New York
(Photography: Jason Wyche, New York / Courtesy: Sean Kelly, New York)

Jose Dávila's most recent show at Sean Kelly Gallery, "Stones Don't Move," brings together new examples of the artist's signature bodies of work: his delicately balanced sculptural arrangements, freestanding and forever on the verge of collapse; his "cutout" works, in which he excises the central object or form from photographs of iconic artworks; and his "Homage to the Square" mobiles, which nod to Josef Albers's various investigations into the square. In the gallery's downstairs exhibition space, Dávila also presents new entries in his series, "A Copy Is a Meta-Original," which feature sparse gestural marks in paint on top of prints from a book analyzing cave paintings, as well as a new sculptural work comprised of stones arranged in an imperfect circle.

One of the show's highlights is Dávila's most recent cutout, in which he takes Roy Lichtenstein's "Femme d'Alger" from 1963 as his subject. Lichtenstein's painting is also a reference to Pablo Picasso's "The Women of Algiers" from 1955, which itself was inspired by Eugène Delacroix's classic 1834 painting "The Women of Algiers in their Apartment." Dávila's version of the image is presented in 13 different versions, each with more materials cut out from it than the previous. Just before the show's opening, Dávila sat down with ARTINFO to discuss the new work, and some of the tenets that run through his multifaceted practice.

In virtually all of your work, there's an element of traversing mediums. In this show alone, you reimagine paintings as sculptures and photographs, book pages as prints and paintings, and so on. What is the significance of this gesture for you?

It's one of my central interests; it always has been. Through the process of translating a work into a different medium, you also change the content. For example, I've also been interested in how the act of cutting out an object makes the paper react and behave as a physical object in the world. Normally in photography the paper is used merely as a vehicle to put an image into the world, representing something else. But by cutting it, the paper is suddenly representing itself; the viewer is aware of its physicality, its fragility. It becomes a three-dimensional work. There's a Mexican poet named José Agustín, who has a line about wet sand being neither the land nor the sea. It's both and it's neither. I'm interested in those areas, and how you can convert and change meaning.

That's what's so great about the seriality of the "Femme d'Alger" cutouts. Your understanding of the work transitions gradually from a photograph to a sculpture as you start to see, for example, the edges of the paper curl, the shadows on the wall behind the print, and so on.

Exactly. Through the process it stops acting like an image and instead acts like a sculpture. And, by losing the color, it looks like the trace of the original image and starts to feel more like a drawing than a painting. There are many things at play.

Let's talk about the "Femme d'Alger" cutouts. In those works, there are three different generations of artists present within it.

In every decision, there's always more than one interest or answer. I wanted to do a serial cutout that would make very visible just how much you can intervene into an image by cutting out and stripping away its parts. When you only show one, the audience has a certain memory of it that they use to fill in the missing space, but it's just a memory — that's their only point of reference. I already had the idea of presenting a cutout serially, to let the audience see how the original work could be reduced to various stages. When I came up with this idea, I was thinking about which image would have the most dimensions, both visual and historical. I came to find Roy Lichtenstein's "Femme d'Alger" from 1963, which, as you point out, has already been tackled by Delacroix, Picasso, and Lichtenstein. The image in itself is a fractal of the work. And the seriality of the works represents the transformations that the original image has gone through. In that moment, it made perfect sense, and I had to think no further.

Why is it important for you to so directly confront art history? For other appropriationist artists, the act of using another image in their own work tends to be a more aggressive move — the artist takes the image, perhaps illegally, and makes it their own. But in your work, that move is much more restrained. You may cut out one aspect of the work, but you're still operating on their picture plane. You're altering it, but you're asking the viewer to still think within the framework of that previous image.

I think it comes out of the direct experience of me being a self-taught artist. I learned about art through books and images I could find on the internet. All at once, in the same process, I had to learn art history, art theory, and art-making. So it was an organic collusion, in a way. I was never interested in trying to hide the references; I wanted to be very blunt in the use of other works.

I like what you said about operating on top of the other work, because I think that's exactly what it is. It's using that work as the prime material, while also generating a space for critical response. For instance, when I reimagined Donald Judd's stacks with cardboard: embedded in that work was a political commentary about how you could achieve the same spatial impact with much lesser means, that an artist from Latin America or a third world country would work with cardboard while a first world artist would have to work with very strong, expensive materials. So there are always certain types of commentary about the works that I'm interacting with in the cutouts, but ultimately it remains about the original creations. In a way, it's not about my work.

Why do you choose to show your different bodies of work together? In the case of this particular show, the cutouts, paintings, and different series of sculptural works all exist together.

Certainly that's always a primary concern. I work with different bodies of work that don't necessarily have a correlation between them, but I like to have present a widespread range of interests and research and work. Rather than simply focusing on one thing and repeating it over and over again, I prefer to be open to finding new materials, new interests, etc. Sometimes it can be a challenge to make two works suddenly collide and to generate a dialogue between them. But I have found through experience that, when I do that, I start to find the not-so-obvious point of intersections between them. That doesn't happen until I risk it and put them in the same space. There's always the chance that it won't work, and that they'll just be two bodies of work cohabitating in the same space. I was afraid that might be the case for this show, but, through the process of installation, I started to realize, for example, the form of the cutouts has a lot of similarities with the sculptures — the transparency of the glass and the interaction of geometrical and non-geometrical shapes.

Going in, I didn't feel that either body of work could totally stand on its own in the gallery's big space. It allowed me to say, Okay, I'm going to try to make two works talk to each other.. Then I have two other spaces to then fully concentrate on the other works. But, as you'll notice, there is one work that isn't

apart of a larger series but just stands on its own — the paint-on-linen work, titled “Here the simplification,” in the big space. I wanted that to serve as a lynchpin for the other works.

That painting is also visually similar to the works downstairs.

Exactly. I wanted it to provide a pivotal point for the show. That’s why there’s only one. It obviously has a very graphic and visual similarity to the other forms, especially the sculptures and the paintings downstairs. For me, it also invokes Ellsworth Kelly, who talked about entering into these forms by looking at the shadows, which also has a lot to do with the sculptures and “Femme d’Alger” cutouts, as they interact with the light in the gallery. So it made sense to me to present that particular painting there, so everything would feel connected.

What about the sculpture downstairs, which is comprised of stones arranged in a circle on the gallery floor. The stones are made of many of the materials you often use, but I’ve never seen your work presented in that way.

The title is “Imperfect Circle. It stands against the cube — the cube being a symbol for the platonic human desire to construct geometrical, perfect shapes. The stones are, obviously, primitive elements of construction, but are also abstract forms unto themselves. Same for the imperfect circle. It connects to the very childish, direct gestures of the paintings on paper downstairs. I wanted to address this idea of the essential desire of expressing and making art that we’ve always had. Those texts, that the paintings are on top of, are from a book that analyzes cave paintings, and the origins of art. Additionally, the circle is reminiscent of a fireplace — a primitive form of sustenance and way of bringing people together.



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