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HECHO EN MEXICO, MADE FOR LA

Guadalajara natives Jose Dávila and Carmen Argote, who is now one of Los Angeles' brightest lights, talk about the intersections of memory, architecture and home in their interactive art installations for Pacific Standard Time.

WRITTEN AND PRODUCED BY **MICHAEL SLENKE** SELF-PORTRAITS BY **JOSE DÁVILA AND CARMEN ARGOTE**

"AFTER THIS, I NEED TO GO DEEP INTO the studio for some new work," Jose Dávila tells me as we drive from the Pacific Design Center to my home in Hollywood for a talk with Carmen Argote. By "this," the Guadalajara-born-and-based artist is referring to the eight concurrent exhibitions he has work being shown in around the globe. That is to say nothing of his biggest project to date, *Sense of Place*, a 12 x 12 x 12 foot cement cube built from 40 Tetris-like volumes—each weighing up to 450 pounds—at the entrance of West Hollywood Park. The installation has been 10-years-in-the-making with the Los Angeles Nomadic Division and will disassemble in three stages and send the various pieces to 20 different locations throughout the city from Plummer Park to the Santa Monica Pier. In May, it will reassemble after various states of use (or abuse) at the park to offer up some kind of psychic thumbprint of the city. Without a doubt it is one of the most ambitious projects on display for the Getty's Pacific Standard Time: LA/LA. So when Dávila says that he's going right back into the studio to produce entirely new bodies work for another round of solo shows—at Guadalajara's Travesía Cuatro and Mexico City's Galería OMR during Zona MACO—in addition to two monographs (one with 20 authors writing micro-fictions about each of the destinations for *Sense of Place*) it's surprising, but then not. After studying architecture, but never practicing, he launched his art career with a series of photographs, dubbed *There But Not*, featuring architectural and art history icons that he literally cut out of the printed image. Since that auspicious debut his practice has always pushed the boundaries of light, space, architecture and the balance that can be found in voided images or slabs of marble and glass anchored to a boulder with industrial tie downs (or simply gravity).

As we sit down with a round of tequila, Argote holds forth on her parallel trajectory. "Both of my parents are from Guadalajara," she says, noting her family moved to L.A. when she was 5. "My father went to architecture school and he had this way of doing blueprint drawings—very minimal and imperfect but in plan—and my mother is a pattern-maker so that is a different visual inventory. I think of them as separate and that I am where they come

together." Her first work, *720 Sq. Ft.: Household Mutations* (2011), merged these two inventories in the space of a painted carpet that was recently acquired by LACMA in August and is currently on display in the museum's "Home—So Different, So Appealing" survey. "Deep down inside my work is really about economy and class," says Argote, whose painted architectural garments were just featured in the 2017 California-Pacific Triennial at the Orange County Museum of Art and a collaborative show with Rafa Esparza at Ballroom Marfa. Meanwhile, her 2014 installation "Houses He Wanted to Build"—abstractions of her father's drawings that were originally draped over a Highland Park residence—is floating above the booth of her Colombian gallery Instituto de Visión at ProyectosLA. She's also been in residence for weeks this fall at Panel LA making use of cardboard, coffee (as paint), and a bunch of found pine needles and chain-link fence for a project titled "Pyramids," which subverts the false hierarchies she was spoon fed as a working class expat from Guadalajara. "I grew up with the fantasy of Guadalajara and the fantasy of upward mobility in Los Angeles and I relate them to my experience as an artist," says Argote, who plans to travel back to her birthplace in the fall for a new project that will require her to slow down a bit. While Dávila won't have that leisure he says the languorous pace and ease of the city should help his process. In fact, he echoes John Baldessari's reasoning for living in Los Angeles—"I live here because L.A. is ugly... If I lived in a great beautiful city, why would I do art?"—as his rationale for remaining in his hometown.

Here, the two artists meet for the first time and discuss everything from their current projects in L.A. to a Guadalajara mansion they've both partied at to an upcoming Mexican motorcycle adventure.

Michael Slenske: Where did this project start for you?

Jose Dávila: I started to plan an urban intervention with Los Angeles Nomadic Division many years before PST, but for diverse reasons the project didn't happen. When Shamim Momin was just starting LAND as director, I was one of the first artists she approached. At some point I had a similar project that was more of

Jose Dávila producing the pieces for his *Sense of Place* sculpture at his Guadalajara studio.



"The individual pieces will go to different sites in Los Angeles...Some will be graffitied; some will be smashed. I don't know if one of them will even be missing, so all of this history they will bring as a sponge back into the work."

—Jose Dávila

a multi-formal sculpture that comes out of the cube as an anchor form that you could open in a park and have in different shapes during certain time lapses. But it was a way bigger cube, made with wire frames and metal, more like a playground. For one reason or another we didn't feel that it was good enough. We didn't find the funding, there were some technical issues in how to make it in Mexico, but at some point Shamim called me and said, "We have PST coming up, would you be interested in developing a project as a commission." I took up the other project where it ended and developed it into one that involved all of L.A. as a city.

MS: How far away is it from where it began?

JD: It has changed in material, it has changed in size and it has changed in scope. I think it's much broader to spread 40 different pieces in 20 sites around L.A. than just being able to shift the form of a cube in one single park. But it has common ground. Obviously, there is a certain reference to minimal art with the cube as a platonic solid base, but this project has to be with a nature of its own. At some point, if you think about it, you can pinpoint relationships that were not planned. For example, Joseph Beuys's project of the trees because it brings into question the idea of how to make one project that is disseminated into many pieces of unity and fragmentation and how to have one sculpture that can be spread all around the city.

MS: It almost feels like Tetris in a way.

JD: It's very much tridimensional Tetris and I was an avid Tetris player as a kid.

Carmen Argote: In hearing you talk, it really reminds me of when I go to Guadalajara and the dissemination of these ideals of minimalism, but interpreted in different ways.

JD: Exactly.

CA: Every neighborhood interprets it differently and it reminds me of these pieces of *Sense of Place* in a way, but they are all part of this bigger system. It's metaphoric.

JD: I think what is interesting in what Carmen is saying is how different movements or ideas of art are localized or tropicalized through the actual fabrication of things in Guadalajara. For example, in this case, you can see the cube is not about this perfect industrial engineering. It's actually man-made, so it has a direct link to handcrafts but I think that is what makes it very Mexican in a way as opposed to 1960s or '70s minimalism, which is very precise.

CA: I think with *720 Sq. Ft.* the handmade is right on the carpet itself, but I'm really interested in hearing Jose speak about where these influences come from. When I was making that piece I hadn't connected my father's practice as an architect with my work. When we first came here he tried to get a job so he made all of these

architectural plans by hand. They were all from above and drawn out in a very specific style and when I was a kid I would look at these and I think that imprinted and stayed with me. To me, when I look at those drawings they look minimal but it's not Donald Judd at all. It's not entering from that point it's these layered interpretations of movements from Europe that have been translated and adapted. When I was working on the piece I wanted to make work that was more personal, but about architecture, so I was sitting in the house that I had grown up in I and I was looking at this dirty, 20-plus year-old brown carpet with all these stains. We never had the money to change it. What I decided to do was reveal the shape because in my visual inventory the shapes of spaces were very meaningful, so I taped maybe eight to 12 inches from the perimeter and then I painted the middle area of the entire apartment white and then through the years—because that piece is 7 years old—all the grease begins to seep through so it's revealing itself through time.

JD: When I was looking at your work today I was thinking how interesting it is that the carpet ends up being an object that monitors personal human activity through all the stains or certain parts where certain furniture was and it might not look like the rest of the carpet because it wasn't used. I was thinking about how that related to the work I'm doing and how the individual pieces will leave the cube to go to different sites in Los Angeles and how people will interact with those individual pieces in different ways. For instance, the ones in the Venice skate park will be skated on and have all the traces of that skating while maybe some others that are at the Beverly Hills Sculpture Garden no one might actually touch it. Those pieces will come back to form the cube again with the imprint of whatever happened to them and around them. Some of them will be graffitied; some will be smashed. I don't know if one of them will even be missing, so all of this history or stories that happens to them while they were away they will bring as a sponge back into the work and I think about how the carpet is a sponge of the history of the family, in this case yours.

MS: In regards to the work at ProyectosLA and Panel LA, do you think that work overlaps with *720 Sq. Ft.* and the concerns you had then?

CA: It's really given me a way of working, not just because it's one of my first pieces, but because it's personal. I enter it through my process in a personal way, but it still has to make what I call "the flip" so it has a conversation with minimalism or painting and what I call "the graphic element" and flips between a painting and the object that it is. So "Houses He Wanted to Build" is a combination of a rubbing of a house in Highland Park on muslin that combines

several of my father's architectural drawings of these houses that he wanted to build in Mexico. There was a feeling that you couldn't get these houses. The pool and the pony and the whole fantasy was somewhere else back in Mexico and that really stayed with me as a child and when I look at the L.A. landscape that's layered in many ways in front of it. I always encounter that when I see that house. It's just this nice four bedroom house. It becomes this imaginary house so at Proyectos instead of being shown on the house it's hovering, hanging above.

MS: Your pieces won't be hanging at Proyectos I presume.

JD: No, I'm showing a couple of new sculptures that deal with the notion of gravity, balance, and something very primitive like a boulder or rock with a quintessential material for a sculpture, which is marble historically, but in a very precarious balance in a very precarious way. There's no modification of the elements or materials, it's only the composition of the positioning. No tie downs.

MS: So it's kind of dangerous in a way.

JD: Only in L.A. [LAUGHS] I tend not to start with a sketch of what to do but a vague idea of what I want to make in terms of elements dialoguing with balance, equilibrium, like I have to balance this rock otherwise this piece of marble will fall and what do I have at hand? Okay, I have another rock. It would be impossible to sketch the idea beforehand. The process is very much the same with the ratchet straps. But I guess at some point ratchet straps have their own limitations.

CA: It's so resonant, this idea of being surprised in the studio. You were talking about this concept of just responding and I'm thinking about the projects I've been doing. The last three projects that I've worked on at OCMA, Ballroom Marfa, and LACMA the timelines are much faster so I'm in a position of sink or swim. I used to make these models to think and plan and now it's more about responding to the space. How is the space making me feel? It comes from staying there, sleeping there.

MS: You're literally sleeping there?

CA: I'm in residence, yeah. For Panel LA I've been sleeping there for three weeks and for Marfa it was two weeks from the conception to production. I'm responding to the spaces and that dictates the material and that dictates how the whole thing is going to respond to the architecture.

MS: Where do the wearable pieces come from?

CA: I just call them garments. They are paintings that transform into architecture because they are so big and then I cut into it and the architecture becomes doors and windows that get reconfigured over the body. Architecture is attached to the grid, but how do you organize over the human body? My answer was through pattern-

making, taking these cut out pieces and then laying these patterns that are designed for specific garments. The architectural move, the one-to-one to the body was something I was interested in.

MS: It sounds like *Sense of Place*.

JD: The cube in West Hollywood Park, at some point, will not be there, it will disappear completely and at some point it will come back in a different form using elements that bring back memory and imagination. It evolves organically and then somehow I believe that every work you've done is included in the new work you're doing. Even if it's not there, it's embedded. Every work contains all the past works.

CA: It reminds me of when I got to Marfa. I noticed all these boxes and in Los Angeles you never really see boxes because they get collected. People have routes. It's competitive. But in Marfa I was on a bicycle collecting trash, and when people saw me collecting boxes they were like, "Oh, do you want another box?" So it became a way for me to know the town and to talk to people because everybody had these boxes and the boxes had this beautiful shape when they are laying flat, like a cross. I'd been thinking about the way things are arranged and creating psychological architecture, if that makes sense. You arrange your things and create new spaces because you arrange them in a certain way. I started thinking about a previous piece that I had done in Mansión Magnolia in Guadalajara.

JD: My friend got married there.

CA: My aunt owns it. It belonged to my grandmother. It's a beautiful house. But the work in Marfa is about shifting perspectives, seeing things differently and that process of being in the moment and responding and being surprised and letting that guide me is becoming increasingly important. So the work, the material shifts at Panel LA, I'm really surprised how it turned out. I think the show is really about upward mobility for me. I grew up in that neighborhood about two miles away. It's called "Pyramids" and I think about when I was in elementary school and I saw this pyramid diagrammed that said, "If you don't go to college you'll make no money; if you go to community college you'll make a little money; and if you go to college you'll be fine." I've thought a lot about these systems that have to do with ideas of success or upward mobility. I'm staying true to the materials that are available so I'm using cardboard boxes and coffee because I'm always drinking coffee and it's always around and I'm using chain-link fences and pine needles that I collect on walks. I'm accessing emotions I had as a child and emotions I'm having currently that relate to economy and class.

MS: Some other Latin artists I've spoken with who are participating

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in PST were curious about the large mandate of the project and that only in the US would we presume to ask, "Hey, Latin America, will you come show us your art?" You would never have a broad city-wide show about American art in Guadalajara.

BOTH LAUGH

JD: Centers of power are a magnet and then obviously that stays in the subconscious and you always expect things to come to you instead of going to them, so in that sense I guess that is true. Come and show us what you do, what you are. I remember years ago there was this art fair in New York City that was devoted to Latin American art and African art and I thought, "Why isn't there an art fair devoted to Caucasian European art?" It's because that's everywhere, that's every fair. But if you do an art fair of Latin American art or African art or Asian art in many ways it ghettoizes certain art that should be more universal.

CA: It is what you make it. The systems were already in place before PST. There's a trajectory, there's an arrow pointing from Latin America to the U.S. and Europe. There always has been. So I don't think that's the point. I think actually what is interesting right now is that we are meeting for the first time.

JD: I haven't felt that PST is at all exoticizing the Latin American aspect. That's what I was saying with those art fair projects, which tend to exoticize because through that it's also easier to sell in a very precise box. In this case, PST is more about gathering what is already here. I think it's fair to say the relation between Los Angeles and Latin America is—well, Los Angeles was Latin America.

CA: Your friend got married at Mansión Magnolia.

JD: Yes, exactly.

CA: It's all connected.

JD: All these links do exist and have existed. They are not being created to have a show. I think it's more about accepting them and making them more open to everyone and focusing on some things that weren't seen.

MS: I guess it's serendipitous that PST is happening in this political climate.

JD: Definitely. These things happen, these fortunate coincidences.

MS: So what's next?

CA: I'm learning to ride a motorcycle after Panel. I'm going to be going to Guadalajara to work on a piece in November. The motorcycle is part of that, but I'm slowing down a little bit because the last projects have been so fast. I want to bring what I've learned from the last three projects but slow it down and let the work develop with that confidence. I am different with each work so I feel this is the time to take on something big.

JD: I'm going back to the studio. I would just like to keep on working in the same way I've been doing and try to find some new results. I know that might sound contradictory because if you're looking for new results then you should change your approach.

MS: Isn't that the definition of insanity?

JD: Right, but I guess I am more and more confident with the processes going on in my studio and I'm more curious about the new things that can come out of them. Instead of changing the process I'm trying to go deeper.



Carmen Argote performing in her painted architectural garments at the Orange County Museum of Art.