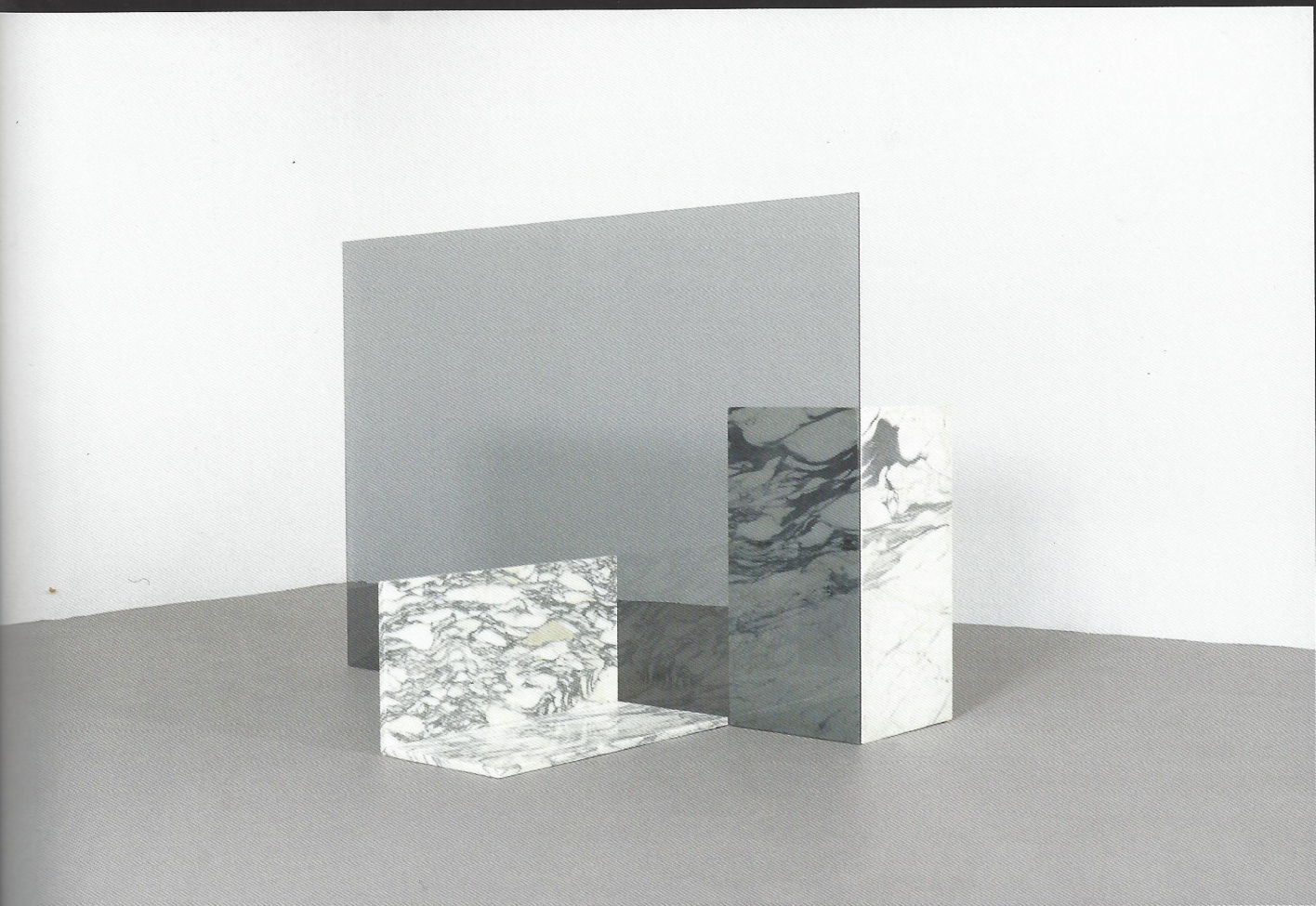


**G**

**THE FIGHT  
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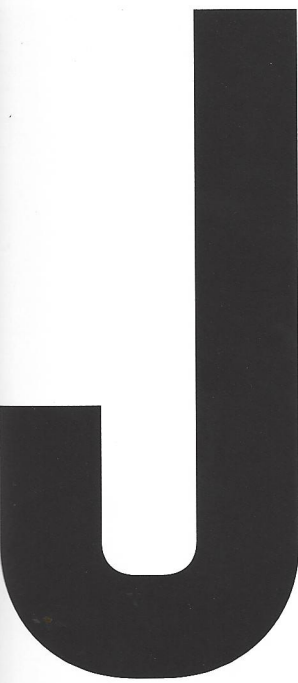


JOSE  
DÁVILA

# ITY

*The pleasures of Jose Dávila's work are akin to those of a great novel: suspense, wit and the thrill of recognizing an old idea born anew. The Mexican artist is best known for his photographic cutouts and for his sculptures, which appear to have conquered gravity. Trained as an architect, Dávila still sometimes operates within that profession's vocabulary and concerns—while at the same time carrying the weight of art history lightly but persistently. Words: Ariela Gittlen.*





ose Dávila's ongoing series *Joint Effort* combines ordinary construction materials in restrained yet surprising ways. Panes of glass and blocks of marble are leaned, tied and balanced, sometimes at the height of tension, but always with engineered precision.

Dávila also revels and romps amid the visual language of Western art, reproducing Donald Judd's pristine boxes in cardboard and repeatedly reimagining Josef Albers's *Homage to the Square* series in gilded ceramic, coloured glass, and, most recently, as a collection of lazily spinning mobiles. In his recent show at Sean Kelly, he investigated the language of art-historical scholarship by painting over the top of captions culled from a textbook, the airy blooms of paint taking the place of faded cave paintings and other ancient artefacts.

This will be a busy year for Dávila, who has solo shows at the Kunsthalle Hamburg in Berlin and Österreichisches Museum für angewandte Kunst in Vienna. In September, he will participate in the Getty Museum's initiative *Pacific Standard Time: LA/LA*, an array of Southern California-based exhibitions. With a grant awarded by LAND, Dávila will create a large-scale, modular public artwork that pays homage to the diversity and character of Los Angeles's many neighbourhoods.

When I spoke with the artist over Skype, he had just returned from New York to his studio in Guadalajara, the city where he was born and now lives and works.

*Was there a moment during your training as an architect when you realized that you wanted to make art instead?*

Since the very beginning I was very dubious about whether to go to school for art or architecture. I was more interested in going into art school, but what I found here in Guadalajara was not exactly what I was looking for and when I visited the architecture school I was immediately drawn to what I saw: models and space-making lighting, etc. So I went to architecture school, but no more than a year and a half into it I had already started thinking I wanted to do art. At that school, classes like history of art, sculpture and painting were already embedded in the architecture school and I was drawn to that.

*Did studying architecture give you any tools that you still use in your work?*

It certainly did. This capability of being able to draw what you're thinking, to make it real by downloading it onto paper, is a powerful tool, and one I use every day. I think a lot about materiality, fighting the force of gravity, proportion and scale. All things that were part of my education in architecture are perfectly applicable to sculpture making.

*In your recent show at Sean Kelly in New York, your ongoing series of Joint Effort sculptures looked less precariously balanced than they have done in the past. How has this body of work*

*changed since you began balancing glass and stone?*

Other works I've done previously with glass, marble and ratchet straps were intended to make the fight against gravity visible. As you point out, they often had a more precarious balance, but in this case these sculptures are actually in a state of rest. The glass is straight because the two pieces of marble beside it are an opposing force. As with the others, it's still an equation of balance, but in this case the forces are horizontal and the glass is perfectly vertical. It's a moment of stability in a way.

*Why did you jettison all that tension?*

I think it's just a natural result of working with different balances. When the glass is stable it shows another aspect of gravity. I wanted to have something that looked more solid.

*Are the new glass and marble works site-specific, as others from this series have been in the past?*

In this case I used the space only as a vehicle to put this work into. It was more about the sculptures themselves than the space that surrounded them, which is also a shift in my practice. At other times I have always been very aware of the space where the works would be, but in this case I just wanted to fully concentrate on what the sculptures would ask me, what they needed. Therefore, I answered those questions only in regard to the sculptures themselves.

*You were more interested in the relationship between the sculptures and the viewer than between the sculptures and the space?*

The important relation was about how the sculptures functioned in the space, how people would interact with them as they moved through them, how they change your experience of the exhibition by blocking or directing you in a certain way.

*Your photo cutouts based on Roy Lichtenstein's Femme d'Alger are also a departure from your previous strategy, because instead of only altering a single image, you show the same print in thirteen variations, each with an increasing number of elements cut away. Why did you approach these pieces differently?*

Normally when I work with cutouts, I do many proofs, cutting different parts of the same image in order to choose how to show it as a final work. But when I saw these proofs I decided to show them all together as one work because it would demonstrate how much you can affect the original image by intervening in it. Sometimes when you only see one image, you don't have a very fresh memory of the original one, so you don't know the extent of the intervention.

*Was it a demonstration of the way you test ideas as part of the creative process?*

That's exactly what that piece was. It was the first time that I used the whole process to make the work, not only choosing one part of it, but rather showing it as a whole.

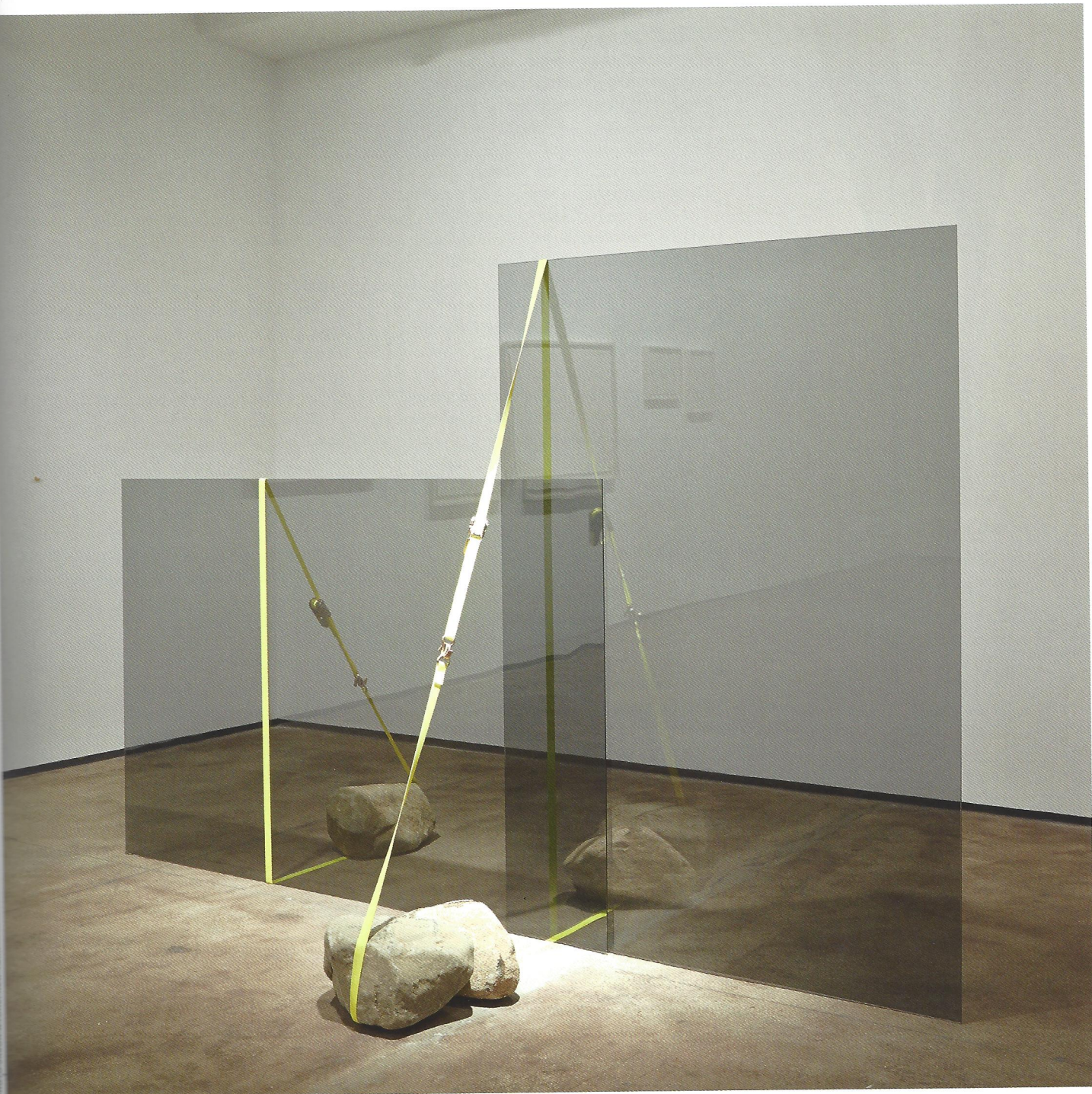


**This page**

Portrait by Don Stahl at  
*Jose Dávila: Stones Don't Move*  
at Sean Kelly, New York

**Opposite page**

*Untitled*  
2014  
Glass, boulders, ratchet straps, glass  
190.5 x 129.5cm each,  
overall 190.5 x 287 x 165.1cm



**“THE UNITED STATES AND MEXICO ARE  
NEIGHBOURS, WE ARE INDIVISIBLE. EVEN IF [TRUMP]  
WANTS TO DIVIDE US, IT’S IMPOSSIBLE”**



*our new works on paper, A Copy Is a Meta-Original, are captions copied from an old art-history textbook and spotted with paint. What is the relationship between text and image?*

I was very interested in this art-history book because all the captions that are supposedly descriptive are actually very abstract, even poetic. They include the opinion of the author. They're also trying to explain something that was made thousands of years ago, so they're guessing in a way, because the intentions of the artist are unknown. When I was reading these captions I realized that they are opinions that could very well be applied to anything.

When I draw something that is obviously *not* being described on top of these captions, it opens a free flow of associations. Because what you see isn't what you're reading, you're compelled to make connections between what you're reading and what you're looking at.

*The captions read like they're from another era. How old is the book?*

It's an antique from Oxford University, published in 1919.

*So it's a little window into what art history was like in the early twentieth century, on top of which you've layered your own associations?*

The newer books about art history are just more dull, I don't know why. The captions are more often very dull descriptions, there's no interpretation. If you read the same caption from a 1919 book and a 2009 book, you'd be a little bit sad about how it is described today.

*It reminds me of the difference between reading the King James Bible and then reading the newer translation. The newer version is clearer, but you lose so much of the beauty of the language.*

There's a way art historians understood art a long time ago that was by looking at the past and making an interpretation of it. Now scholars are more concerned with the philosophical aspects of art, rather than taking an archaeological approach to discovering what made art happen. Today it's just more about what art is trying to tell us about our current state of affairs.

*Your work often references images from the art-historical canon, and relies on the viewer sharing this visual language. Do you ever worry that we're losing a set of common touchstones when it comes to visual culture?*

I don't think so. I see a lot of things repeating because they're grasping at the very same ideas and concepts. No matter where they come from, a different country, a different artist or a different age, they are very similar because we are involved in this process of globalization which channels into thinking about the same ideas.

*Your references are very Western. You don't venture too far outside that narrative.*

My references are a direct result of studying art from books. In Mexico we have a huge deficit

of books about the current state of local artists. If you go to a bookstore, normally they only have foreign books. The publishers were mainly American, German or English, and therefore I go along with that narrative.

*Can you talk a little bit about your contribution to the Getty Museum's Pacific Standard Time: LA/LA initiative?*

It's a public sculpture that starts as a cube made out of twenty-three different pieces. Once the cube is installed in Hollywood Park it will slowly start to disappear because the twenty-three pieces will be separated and taken to iconic parts of Los Angeles. One will be installed in a skatepark in Venice. Another one will become a bench in a public basketball court. After about six months the pieces will start to return to Hollywood Park and the cube will form again, but maybe some pieces will have the traces of what's happened to them, graffiti or whatever happens. The sculpture is really about unity and disintegration at the same time. In a way Los Angeles is a city of many cities together, no? It's actually very different, one place to another, and each has its own character and demographics. They are together by proximity, but they are different cities within.

*In the face of Donald Trump's promise to divide the US and Mexico by building a border wall, Pacific Standard Time's theme of "LA/LA" (Latin America/Los Angeles) seems more potent than ever. Especially since you don't have to go too far back in history to when the western US was effectively part of Mexico. Exactly.*

*So much is shared between the two places that any kind of division seems false.*

Right. For example, my mother's family is from Texas, they've lived there for generations, when Texas was Mexico. Suddenly, when Texas was annexed by the US in 1860, the border moved, but because they stayed living on their land they became Americans. It's funny because I have a lot of family who don't even speak Spanish, but their names are Spanish, and they are still seen as immigrants in Texas even though they've been living there for over 150 years.

*What is the role of the artist in politics? In these difficult times has it become important to make art that's political in some way?*

I think we have to be very engaged politically as citizens. Whether you're an artist or a cook you have to be involved in these times. Especially when we are being attacked as a country, and called names by this insane and stupid human being, Donald Trump. The United States and Mexico are neighbours, we are indivisible. Even if he wants to divide us, it's impossible. Artists don't have to express their political views through their work, because sometimes art might not be the most effective vehicle, but we do have a responsibility as citizens.

#### Opening spread

Untitled  
2016  
Smoked glass and marble  
130 x 190 x 121.1cm

#### Second spread

Untitled (Ohhh... Alright...) II  
2016  
Archival pigment print  
67.6 x 70cm  
(framed 70.3 x 72.9 x 7.6cm)

#### Opposite page

Untitled (Cowboy), 2013  
Archival pigment print  
96.6 x 70cm  
(framed 99.5 x 72.9 x 7.6cm)

