



Naufus Ramirez figueroa Incremental architecture

[Naufus Ramírez-Figueroa: *The House at Kawinal*](#) is on view from 6 June to 9 September 2018 at the New Museum, New York

In Naufus Ramírez-Figueroa’s solo show at CAPC Musée d’Art Contemporain de Bordeaux earlier this year, the vast cathedrallike museum appeared as if in the macabre aftermath of some artificial catastrophe – an ambitious genetic experiment, perhaps. Its blackened floor was strewn with white carved forms, like fallen masonry. Curious human–plant hybrids hung from large steel structures or languished among the ruins, their bizarre anatomies starkly defined in the cold, hard glare of fluorescent tubes embedded in the rusting framework. The most unsettling of these hybrids, the only figure to stand on its own feet, was a singular plant-pod-dwarf. An oxymoronic amalgam of horror and humour, of sinister intent and childlike innocence – this diminutive character might be perpetrator or victim, producer or product. Cruel ringmaster or tragic clown.

This queer figure encapsulates a compelling quality of the Guatemala-born, Canada-raised, Berlin-based artist’s work: its refusal to be entirely one thing or another. Ramírez-Figueroa’s work is queer in the widest possible sense of that word, a sense that includes the dissolution of binary oppositions: male/female, gay/straight, light/dark, light/heavy, culture/nature, tacky/tasteful and so on, but also encompasses a range of contemporary and historical dictionary definitions such as strange, odd, peculiar, confounding and tricky.

The title of the show, *Linnaeus in Tenebris*, recalls the title of Bertolt Brecht’s 1919 play *Lux in Tenebris* (*Light in Darkness*) in which the hypocritical Paduk deters brothel visitors with a bright light and illustrated lectures on venereal disease, only to invest his profits in one of the brothels, allowing him full exploitative rights over the sex workers. Both Ramírez-Figueroa’s largescale installation and Brecht’s farcical play humorously scrutinise the dubious desires and motives of those who profess to ‘enlighten’. I begin to make so many correlations between Brecht’s play and Ramírez-Figueroa’s work that I am surprised and slightly crestfallen when the artist tells me Brecht is not a deliberate referent and he doesn’t think he knows the play (“my work is often more intelligent and better-read than me”). He adds, however, that members of his family involved in Guatemalan experimental theatre during the 1970s were “definitely into Brecht”, so a subconscious awareness is not entirely impossible.



Incremental architecture, 2015, performance for video. Courtesy the artist and Proyectos Ultravioleta, Guatemala City

While many performance artists insist on distinguishing their art practice from theatre, Ramírez-Figueroa, whose practice encompasses live action, sculpture, drawing and printmaking, is more open to exploring the potential of theatrical tropes and devices in his work. His sculptures often double as props and are designated as such in *Props for Eréndira* (2014), a work commissioned by the 10th Gwangju Biennale, which imagines an alternative set for the titular film, scripted by Gabriel García Márquez (left unmade for over a decade, the film was eventually released in 1983, directed by Ruy Guerra). *Corazón del Espantapájaros* (*Scarecrow Heart*, 2016), a recent performance commissioned by the Bienal de São Paulo and Los Angeles County Museum of Art, borrows its title from an experimental 1975 production by art students from the Universidad Popular in Guatemala of Hugo Carillo’s 1962 play of the same title. The students’ adaption of the play was in direct protest to the repressive political environment imposed by the Guatemalan government, and many of its participants were forced to leave the country or assume new identities following its staging.

Ramírez-Figueroa states an interest in the theatre as “a tool of consciousness-raising”, but his work often evokes early-twentieth-century movements in the arts, such as the Theatre of the Absurd and Dada, which offer less direct rebukes to the politics of war by refusing to engage with authority on its own terms or with its own language, rather than the more overt politicking of the 1970s.

Beckett’s famous (and – forgive me – relentlessly quoted) line from *Worstward Ho* (1983), ‘Try Again. Fail again. Fail better’, came to me during my first encounter with Ramírez-Figueroa’s work. In the video *Incremental Architecture* (2015) the artist walks into the frame wearing a white corrugated plastic cube that, with its facade of columns and arches, resembles an architect’s model. With his bare arms and legs protruding from the cube, there is something of Alice – grown too large for the White Rabbit’s house – about Ramírez-Figueroa’s appearance. He is awaited in stillness and silence by three assistants dressed in stagehand-black and arranged on a two-tier scaffold and step ladder, and three musicians assembled before a marimba bearing their band name, Siempre Juntos (Always Together). The assistants pile four more modules of varying architectural styles atop the one worn by Ramírez-Figueroa. Balancing the precarious vertical tower block, which extends his height twofold, the artist takes up position and raises his arms outward. At this signal the musicians play a sprightly, vaudevillesque tune and Ramírez-Figueroa begins to dance slowly, with deadpan expression and improbable grace. The music stops upon the inevitable collapse of the assemblage, and the artist returns to the assistants, who pile on more architecture. The sequence is repeated twice more until all the modules lie scattered on the floor (not unlike the ‘fallen masonry’ in *Linnæus in Tenebris*), whereupon the artist leaves the scene with shoulders slumped and head bowed in the manner of a disappointed child. The repetitive futility and engaging tenacity of the performance also recalls Albert Camus’s central metaphor in *The Myth of Sisyphus*, his 1942 treatise on the absurd.

Even with no wider knowledge of the artist’s work at that point, *Incremental Architecture* offered a great deal: a sad humour, redolent of a forlorn Buster Keaton standing in the window of a fallen house, a reflection on the Sisyphean nature of the human condition and a mischievous critique of progress and the modernist project. The work, I would later learn, is a development of an earlier performance, *A Brief History of Architecture in Guatemala* (2010) (recently revived for the Guggenheim, New York, as part of its Latin American Circle performance presentation in May 2017), which, with costumes modelled on a Mayan pyramid, a colonial church and the modernist National Bank of Guatemala, more specifically critiques colonial appropriation and processes of urban regeneration in Guatemala City.

Ramírez-Figueroa confronts the legacy of the Enlightenment – and by extension European colonialism – with the experience of those displaced and alienated by its reverberant effects

Perhaps it says as much about my own predilections as it does about Ramírez-Figueroa that I once again sensed a Beckettian torpor during a performance in Bordeaux, also titled *Linnæus in Tenebris* and made in collaboration with Guatemalan poet Wingston González. A combination of affectionate codependence and weary antagonism between the two performers was redolent of Vladimir and Estragon in their interminable wait for Godot. The title of González’s script, *The Beach Awaits You*, is both a promise of something better and – given the poet’s references in his text to Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein* (1818), in which Victor’s best friend, murdered by the former’s creation, is washed up on a beach – of death. If the installation, which is recast as a set for the performance, insinuates a bio-catastrophe, these characters, whose costumes made from latex moulds of the sculptures give an uncanny impression of their innards spilling outwards, might be its mutant survivors. Their speech is slow, deliberate and repetitive, as if they are relearning how to speak, or to connect with each other across the gap between their languages as one speaks Spanish, the other French. Even when permitted to read an English translation of the script, I found the dialogue disjointed and difficult to follow, as if the characters were trying to piece together some kind of cohesive meaning from disparate fragments of memory and dream.

If contemporary Western minds are confused by the confluence of contradictions in Ramírez-Figueroa’s work or perturbed by anomalous specimens such as a bunch of bananas sprouting a human arm, one might blame Carl Linnæus, the Swedish botanist who devised the modern system of classifying living organisms. Linnæus is emblematic of Western eighteenth-century rationalism that sought to drive out the ‘darkness’ of irrationality with ‘enlightened’ scientific objectivity. Any creature that cannot be defined within the hierarchal and distinct categories of Linnæan taxonomy is logically deemed monstrous, alien and unnatural – like Frankenstein’s monster. Less well known than his organisation of living things into Kingdoms, Phyla, etc is Linnæus’s subdivision of the species *Homo sapiens* into continental ‘varieties’ – each with particular qualities or failings. Unsurprisingly he deemed his own ‘variety’, *Europæus albus* (white European), superior to all others – a racist belief-dressed-as-fact that enabled moral and scientific justification of colonialism and slavery.

In *Linnæus in Tenebris* Ramírez-Figueroa confronts the legacy of the Enlightenment – and by extension European colonialism – with the experience of those displaced and alienated by its reverberant effects. The steel structures that dominate the installation are like those used on banana plantations, where many of the artist’s compatriots and family members would labour on land they were not permitted to own for a product from which they did not profit: the very definition of Marxist alienation and a major contributory factor to the Guatemalan Civil War (1960–96). Colonial goods shipped to the West were stored in vast, purpose-built warehouses such as this one in the centre of Bordeaux, which now houses the museum of contemporary art. The imposing, navelike space rises nonchalantly above the incriminatory scene with arched and arch indifference. The sculptures, ‘like fallen masonry’, have not fallen from this austere interior but refer instead to the elaborate stone carving that adorns much of Bordeaux’s finest architecture. If plants and animals carved in stone mark an appropriative civilising of nature, Ramírez-Figueroa underscores this imposition by carving his peculiar menagerie from that most unnatural and polluting of materials: expanded polystyrene.

There is an inference that Western ‘scientific objectivity’ is no more rational than crackpot conspiracy theory. There is also, however, a delight in the surreal way these theories create fantastic narratives from disparate elements

It may seem simplistic, ridiculous even, to blame the single figure of Linnæus for the violent fallout of colonialism. In insinuating such a direct causality Ramírez-Figueroa deliberately plays with methods often employed by conspiracy theorists who join the dots between apparently unrelated phenomena to create simple, yet incredible, explanations for complex, often political, affairs. Ramírez-Figueroa’s interest in conspiracy theory was apparent in his sculptural installation *God’s Reptilian Finger* (2016) at Gasworks, London, in which he aligned David Icke’s belief in a shapeshifting reptilian master race from outer space with the pseudo-archaeological practices and beliefs of Mormon missionaries in Guatemala. There is an inference that Western ‘scientific objectivity’ is no more rational than crackpot conspiracy theory. There is also, however, in Ramírez-Figueroa’s work, a delight in the surreal way these theories create fantastic narratives from disparate elements.



Shit-Baby and the Crumpled Giraffe, 2017, carved expanded polystyrene, epoxy resin, fibreglass, mineral pigments, dimensions variable. Photo: Bruno Lopes. Courtesy Kunsthalle Lissabon, Lisbon

Another hybrid, a stork with human toddler legs, appears in Ramírez-Figueroa’s most recent exhibition in Portugal, *Shit-Baby and the Crumpled Giraffe* (2017), an installation sculpted entirely in polystyrene at Kunsthalle Lissabon. Like the child-bearing stork of sexuality-denying parental myth, it holds in its beak a cloth hammock that seems to contain not a baby but a baby’s primary product: shit. The inscrutable concentration on the face of a child-figure, who sits as if on a potty but directly on the floor rather than on any of the pristine chamber pots that are arranged around the space, suggests that he might be the creator of the copious poo that not only soils the stork’s bundle but also rises from a lidded pot like a charmed snake and describes a shit-streamer flourish in midair. The third figure of the sculptural installation is a giraffe that, with its white geometric form and pointed feet, resembles an enlarged origami model. The ‘crumpled giraffe’ appears as a symbol for the mother in a dream of ‘Little Hans’ in Freud’s famous case study of a phobic five-year-old boy used by Freud to demonstrate and prove his hypothesised five stages of psychosexual development – which include the anal stage. In Freudian theory the anal stage, in which the infant takes pleasure in bowel control, precedes the phallic stage, in which the genitals become the primary site of pleasure and Oedipal desire comes into play. Ramírez-Figueroa comically hints at Oedipal sexuality with the suggestive pink protruding tongue of the giraffe ‘mother’. The faeces-clearing-toddler-stork, on the other hand, with its smooth, genital-free crotch, might stand more for the societal repression of sexuality and its equation with filth.

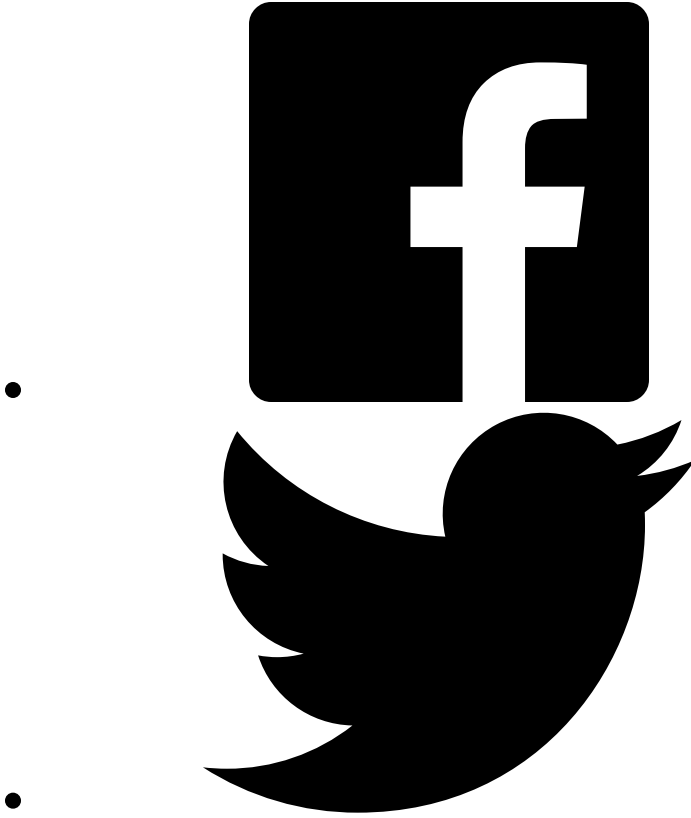
If *Shit-Baby and the Crumpled Giraffe* marks a shift away from the subject of the Guatemalan Civil War, which forced Ramírez-Figueroa and his family to flee Guatemala for Mexico then Canada in his childhood, it retains an analogous concern with unbalanced struggles for autonomy and power. While Ramírez-Figueroa tells me he is keen to call out those guilty of violent exploitation and injustice, his work never feels didactic. There is no moralistic mission to *enlighten*. A couple of months before I saw the Kunsthalle Lissabon installation, I asked Ramírez-Figueroa whether, given his recurrent references to childhood and dreams, he was influenced by Freud. He replied that he “used to enjoy reading Freud’s case studies as if they were short stories”. It strikes me that this proclivity to read fact and theory as fiction – to deny generic distinctions and dichotomies – underlies the uncanny and idiosyncratic nature of Ramírez-Figueroa’s work, in which light can be dark and darkness, brilliantly, light.

Naufus Ramírez-Figueroa: The Green Ray is on show at daadgalerie, Berlin, through 14 January. Another solo exhibition can be seen from 2 March through 7 April at Sies + Hoke, Düsseldorf

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