

CREATIVE BRIEF

SINGULAR VISION

The artist Adrián Villar Rojas brings his unpredictable, unclassifiable work to L.A.

BY CAROL KINO
PHOTOGRAPHY BY MARK MAHANEY

SINCE ARRIVING ON the global art scene in 2011, when he transformed his country's pavilion at the 54th Venice Biennale into a monumental clay forest, the Argentine artist Adrián Villar Rojas has become known for spectacular installations that suggest an epoch beyond the reach of museums. In 2015, for the 12th Sharjah Biennial in the United Arab Emirates, he filled an empty ice factory near a nature preserve on the Gulf of Oman with columns that looked as though they had been excised straight from the earth, packed with geological strata of concrete, plants, dead birds and athletic shoes, and let them crumble in the heat for months. Later that year, his installation off the coast of a Turkish island—sculptures of large animals, including an elephant and rhinos, seemingly dragging other beasts, anchors and fishing nets from the Sea of Marmara—was a high point of Istanbul's 14th Biennial, which opened as refugees began surging across the Mediterranean into Europe.

After a less visible 2016, Villar Rojas, 37, has returned in a major way this year, with four important shows that share the same title, *The Theater of Disappearance*. The first three—one on the roof of New York's Metropolitan Museum, another at Austria's Kunsthaus Bregenz and a third that took over the National Observatory of Athens—opened earlier this year, and the final show, which debuts October 22 at the Geffen branch of L.A.'s Museum of Contemporary Art, promises to be an impressive culmination.

With no fixed address and no studio, Villar Rojas styles himself a nomad—and his creations, which take years of research and preparation to achieve, can be similarly transient, just as likely to crumble into dust as to be preserved for posterity. When he prepares a show, “we don't even ask if there is going to be anything for sale,” says his longtime dealer Mónica Manzutto, a co-founder of Mexico City's Kurimanzutto. “Sometimes things are totally destroyed, sometimes things are sold, and sometimes things are just packed into crates, to be used later.”

More remarkable, perhaps, is that Villar Rojas is able to convince museum curators to turn over their exhibition spaces without giving much indication of what they'll get.

“I've definitely done commissions before where

FIRST LOOK
Adrián Villar Rojas at MOCA's Geffen Contemporary branch, the site of his forthcoming installation.



I might not have known exactly,” says Helen Molesworth, MOCA's chief curator. “But I've always had more of a sense of it, because the artists were making discrete objects rather than an experiential landscape.” In the exhibition's catalog—another inversion of the norm, in which the artist interviews the curator—she confesses her response to Villar Rojas's early plans. “I don't understand how we're going to convince anybody about this project,” Molesworth says. “How are we going to raise money? There's nothing there.”

The allure, she adds now, is that while curators of her generation grew up thinking of the museum “as an amazing, magical time machine that pulls you back to the past,” Villar Rojas is firmly dedicated to the idea of making art for the Anthropocene—a new geographical epoch some scientists have designated for the present day, wherein, they warn, human activity is speeding the destruction of civilization. “When Adrián does work that doesn't really exist after the installation, or that exists only as a fragment, I think he's addressing something about a profoundly different relationship to time,” Molesworth adds. “And to be a good contemporary curator, you have to remain open to the work of the generations that come after you.”

Besides, it's clear as soon as Villar Rojas turns up

at MOCA that the force field of his personality overpowers most objections. He has already paid seven long visits to the museum, during which he talked to everyone on the staff—“from the person that does the security guarding to the director of the museum,” he says. He has also made scores of scouting trips in and around Los Angeles, to television studios, prop houses, sound lots, animatronics labs, molecular bakers, fishmongers, produce stands and more, in search of information and raw material, following up with countless WhatsApp messages and Skype calls.

Now, on the first day on site, it's down to the wire. Villar Rojas and his team have 75 days to create the work. The band of about 15 artists, artisans and carpenters, which Villar Rojas often likens to a roving thespian troupe, is composed mostly of close friends from Rosario, his hometown in Argentina, where his parents and brother also work for him.

Their current task is to set up one gallery as their studio and start unpacking crates, while a crew of workers from MOCA continues readying the Geffen's main 27,000-square-foot space. Nine Villar Rojas team members arrived the night before, with more to come. Although they've already modeled the space and its lighting with computer renderings, they're awestruck by its size in real life. This is one of the largest projects they've tackled. >



BUILDING BLOCKS

Above: Elements for Villar Rojas's project start to arrive. These pieces were originally part of his 2015 piece *Rinascimento*, shown at the Fondazione Sandretto Re Rebaudengo, in Turin, Italy.



FAST FORWARD

Clockwise from below: Part of *The Theater of Disappearance* in Athens; *Planetarium*, his 2015 Sharjah installation; *Untitled (from the Series Rinascimento)*, 2017; *The Theater of Disappearance* at Austria's Kunsthaus Bregenz.



Much of the media they're likely to use is arriving in crates from around the world: the remains of the Sharjah columns; the molds used to cast the creatures in the Istanbul installation; petrified rocks from a 2015 project in Turin, Italy; taxidermied animals from Burbank, California. Later they'll assemble fish, vegetables and fruit into *tableaux vivants* in refrigerator cases and build a kitchen for baking cakes that will sprout mold and mushrooms.

As Villar Rojas explains the project in a pep talk to his team and the MOCA crew, he reaches for metaphors from another favorite subject, music. He describes the Sharjah columns and the Turin rocks as "the bass and the drums," while the organic materials—the fish, fruit, vegetables and cakes—are tools for "improvisation."

Later, after a meeting with a lighting consultant whose solutions strike Villar Rojas as too clean and finished for the work, he extends the metaphor, explaining that he's decided to light it with grocery store refrigerator cases instead. "Once you set up an organism, it tells you very clearly what it needs. The rocks, boulders, columns, ramps—these things enable you to play. They give you the rhythm."

Villar Rojas began this project, as always, with a process he calls "housekeeping"—in other words, reassessing and reworking the exhibition space

itself. Formerly a police car warehouse, the Geffen Contemporary at MOCA opened in 1983 after a renovation by the architect Frank Gehry, serving as a radical inspiration for many other similar institutions, including Tate Modern and Dia Beacon. But after more than three decades, the pioneering venue needed a rethink.

The first thing he tackled was the reception desk, which blocked the entryway. To Villar Rojas, this placement sent the message that MOCA valued institutional politics over art. He asked the staff if they agreed. "The really interesting thing about Adrián is he always asks first, 'How do you do this?'" says Bryan Barcena, the museum's research assistant for Latin American art, who's co-curating the show with Molesworth. "Not, 'I want to do this.' I think that's how he gets to where he does. He allows us to do it." Or, as Villar Rojas puts it, "I am an excuse, or maybe a stimulus, for how they can rethink their space and change things."

The solutions the artist and MOCA arrived at together include opening up the skylights and stripping paint from the clerestory windows, to flood the interior with natural light for the first time in decades. Layers of track lighting have been removed, revealing the ceiling's wooden beams, and everything unrelated to the exhibition space, including

the ticket desk, bookstore, donor walls and reading room, has been relocated to the smaller adjacent gallery. The MOCA crew has taken away the entryway staircases and ramps and transformed most of the floor into a long plain that slopes imperceptibly toward the back wall.

The plan, for the moment, is that visitors will be confronted by a black-and-white cloth backdrop, evoking an old-fashioned Hollywood set, decorated with sketches of buildings that suggest a cross between Latin American utopian modernist architecture and historic Los Angeles movie palaces. Passing through a slit in the curtain, they'll find themselves on a blue-screen soundstage, standing on a crust of sand, immersed in a landscape of rocks, columns, dimly lit refrigerator cases and decaying birthday cakes.

At least, that's what could happen.

"This is a key moment, because we're producing a new project with things that have had a different moment," Villar Rojas says as his team unpacks the first crates, pulling out the silicone molds from Istanbul. "Things that have been art, shipped as stuff."

Will they become art again?

Villar Rojas shrugs. "Who knows?" he says. "But the important thing is, they will have different lives."

For now, it's still improv time. ●

CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT: MATERIALS FROM *RINASCIMENTO*, 2015, PHOTO BY MARK MAHANEY; ADRIÁN VILLAR ROJAS, *PLANETARIUM*, 2015, SHARJAH BIENNIAL 12, KALBA CITY, EAU, COURTESY OF THE ARTIST AND SHARJAH ART FOUNDATION; PHOTO BY JÖRG BAUMANN; ADRIÁN VILLAR ROJAS, *THE THEATER OF DISAPPEARANCE*, 2017, KUNSTHAUS BREGENZ, BREGENZ, AUSTRIA, COURTESY OF THE ARTIST, MARIAN GOODMAN GALLERY, NEW YORK/PARIS/LONDON AND KURIMANZUTTO; MEXICO CITY; PHOTO BY JÖRG BAUMANN; ADRIÁN VILLAR ROJAS, *THE THEATER OF DISAPPEARANCE*, 2017, NEON FOUNDATION AT ATHENS NATIONAL OBSERVATORY (NMO), ATHENS, GREECE, COURTESY OF THE ARTIST, MARIAN GOODMAN GALLERY, NEW YORK/PARIS/LONDON AND KURIMANZUTTO; MEXICO CITY; PHOTO BY JÖRG BAUMANN; ADRIÁN VILLAR ROJAS, *UNTITLED (FROM THE SERIES RINASCIMENTO)*, 2017, THE UNGESTALT, KUNSTHALLE BASEL, BASEL, COURTESY OF THE ARTIST; KURIMANZUTTO, MEXICO CITY; MARIAN GOODMAN GALLERY, LONDON, PARIS, NEW YORK, PHOTO BY PHILIPP HÄNGER/KUNSTHALLE BASEL