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Jose Dávila: 'Photographic Memory'
Kitschy, Ironic and Fun
Sean Kelly
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Jose Dávila is a multidisciplinary artist based in Mexico whose conceptual practice spans numerous media. While he creates paintings, works on paper and sculpture, as well as public art, he is best known for borrowing (or appropriating) from other artists. He has replicated Donald Judd's Minimalist forms using cardboard or shipping containers and in his "cut-out" series, he removes the key element from reproductions of iconic architecture, popular culture and arts such as Dan Flavin, Roy Lichtenstein, Pablo Picasso and Richard Prince.

Dávila began his cut-outs in 2008 and in this ongoing series, removes artworks or architecture from an image to leave a white void, often in the center. Although many artists have worked with erasure and absence, from Gordon Matta Clark to Robert Rauschenberg and John Baldessari, Dávila's technique was inspired by the Mexican folk-art tradition of *papel picado* or "Cut-Paper," which he applies to contemporary art to explore the power of negative space.

For the exhibition *Photographic Memory*, Dávila appropriates specific images from Richard Prince's "Cowboy Series" that were displayed for the first time at the Los Angeles Museum of Art in 2018. To create his "Cowboy Series," Prince re-photographed and cropped expansive color image of Western landscapes filled with cowboys riding horses, many of which were used in the all-pervasive Marlboro cigarette advertising campaign. Prince presented these appropriated pictures as his own artwork—a strategy that was prevalent in conceptual based art from the 1980s and 1990s. In Dávila's reworkings, he not only scales up Prince's originals, but also carefully removes the horses and riders to leave a negative space in the two-dimensional plane of the print. This void becomes the focal point of the new image.

In 2008, Dávila created "*Buildings You Must See Before You Die*," a series of fifty photographs where he removed the central subject from images of architectural landmarks around the world and presented them in a large grid. With the buildings removed, the focus of the images became the surroundings as well as the space around them. He has also cut away important elements in paintings by Lichtenstein and Picasso. In *Untitled (Femme d'Alger)* (2016), a series of photographic works that included thirteen variations, Dávila sequentially removed different aspects of Lichtenstein's work until all that was left was its linear structure.

There is something kitschy, ironic and fun in many of Dávila's cut-outs. For example, it is hard not to smile when looking at the image of a woman staring up at a huge phallic shaped void from Dávila's multi-panel piece, *a chronological history of sculpture* (2013), or marvel at the blank spiral void in a reproduction of Robert Smithson's *Spiral Jetty*.

What stands out in *Photographic Memory* is the conversation about the history of appropriation with Prince as the master appropriator, for better or for worse. The works pay homage to a strategy of art making while also positing that these new creations are uniquely his own. Each *Untitled (Cowboy)* (all works 2023) in *Photographic Memory* is a large-scale archival pigment print, either a single image or a diptych based on Prince's originals where Prince removed pages and spreads from magazines keeping the torn edges and Scotch-taped centers.

Because Dávila's images are reproductions of reproductions, they have a prominent dot-screen. Dávila simply cuts away – though not conceptually simply – the cowboys to leave the landscapes that surround them. This cut-out space casts shadows on the wall seen through the clear frame. The missing image is filled by the surface of the wall and a new dialogue ensues. Devoid of context, the *Untitled (Cowboy)* images feel incomplete. However, when seen and contemplated in relation to the history of appropriation and Dávila's own body of cut-outs, they further the endless cycle of reproduction and continue the art about art conversation.

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