

Art and Cake, October 8, 2017

Ruben Ochoa at Art + Practice
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By Jody Zellen



Three photographs installed low to the ground in a corner of the gallery, provide a key to understanding Ruben Ochoa's evocative installation, *Sampled y Surveyed*, which in numerous ways brings the outside in. These images: *Overlapped in the 90063*, *Still Tripping, 90033*, *Kissed in the 90011* (all 2007) depict concrete pavement blocks and curbs displaced by Ficus tree roots in three Zip codes, a commonplace occurrence in Los Angeles where the natural and man-made must co-exist. As tree roots bulge, the sidewalks become a hazard. While the photographs depict this in situ, Ochoa also creates a sculpture using the proportions of actual sidewalks and curbs to relocate the experience in the center of the gallery. *Get off me...I'm not on you!* (2009-2017) is a work that when displayed often requires excavation of the gallery floor to expose the foundation. In this incarnation a rectilinear concrete island has been placed in the center of the floor. Three interconnected concrete slabs hover above this concrete expanse crushing the rebar rods designed to support them. The uprooted concrete blocks allude to the circumstances in the photographs however in his sculpture Ochoa has exaggerated the displacement.

Ochoa works with materials usually associated with construction and the urban environment—rebar, concrete, and wooden pallets often using them as readymade sculptures— keeping the integrity of the original materials intact while simultaneously using them in the creation of

aesthetic objects. This is most evident in *Economías Apiladas/Stacked Economies*, 2017 a tower of pallets nine feet tall attached to pieces of OSB (oriented strand board) becoming a faux wall that greets viewers upon entering the gallery. The differences in the found materials— types of wood, painted or not— direct the beauty of the work, while also referencing labor and the plethora of pallets in the ‘real world.’

Ochoa’s work explores the ways art and the ‘real world’ can intersect and co-exist. He has a facility to transform the ordinary into something beyond the expected and imbuing it with artistic as well as social considerations. Often, his pieces seamlessly blend with the gallery space as in *Wallpaper with the Sounds of its Own Removal*, 2008 that functions as a temporary wall created by draping dilapidated wallpaper of the natural landscape over steel cables suspended across the space, calling attention to the nuanced colors, shapes and texture of these remains. Accompanying the piece is a looped audio of the process of its removal from its original location — a wall alongside the I-10 freeway. The work is a tongue-in-cheek homage to Robert Morris’ 1961 *Box with the Sound of its Own Making*. But where Morris’ work documented construction, Ochoa records destruction and a different type of labor. These dualities — construction vs destruction are very much at play in Ochoa’s installation. Two works, *If I had a rebar for every time someone tried to mold me*, (2007-17) and *Ebb and Flow* (2017) repurpose rebar. In the former Ochoa uses rebar rods to fill an enclosed space with a gridded frame like those used on construction sites to support poured concrete. In *Ebb and Flow* the steel forms twist and turn as they ascend from floor towards the ceiling. At their apex they are bent around pallets and becoming gigantic metal monsters.

Interspersed with the large-scale sculptures, are examples of Ochoa’s drawings and paintings. In works such as *Incredulity and Redrum* (2013) Ochoa depicts what lays below the surface. In these acrylic paintings on raw linen he illusionistically creates a rectangle cut from the paintings surface that recedes from view. The paintings encapsulate the installations on a smaller scale.

Ochoa’s interest is in spaces— not the depiction of space, but the space of a city, or a freeway or a sidewalk and the codifiers specific to the built environment. He uses construction techniques and builder’s supplies as raw materials for artistic creations. While the works are often architectural in scale, they are very much about the human experience, specifically from the perspective of an outsider who has the confidence to take charge.

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