

Jose Dávila:
Deconstructing Identity
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Photographed by Agustín Arce

With a solo show at Mexico City's OMR Gallery, and a multi-site exposition of large-scale public sculptures throughout Los Angeles, Dávila is quickly defining himself as one of Mexico's most renowned contemporary artists. Yet Dávila's artistic practice—and views toward Mexican contemporary art—deviates from the status quo of the Mexican art world. Mexico's scene, including the best galleries, museums, and private foundations, is largely centered around Mexico City. The US-Mexico border also has its own creative centers and idiosyncratic culture, which many prominent contemporary artists explore and examine in their work. Dávila belongs to neither of these groups. Born and based in Guadalajara, Dávila rejects the label of *Mexican* contemporary artist.

At first glance his art is placeless and timeless; his sculptures and paintings interrogate, reproduce, and deconstruct canonical pieces of 20th century art and architecture. In other works Dávila explores structural tension and balance; pieces of raw construction material are placed at precarious angles, or constructed seemingly on the verge of collapse. Yet his tensions and interventions always neutralize the art works. Famous paintings and photographs are cut out and flattened, and sculptures are safely counterbalanced and structurally sound.

These tensions and pressures come forward in Dávila's personality. Speaking to Dávila before his opening at OMR, he explained that he dislikes the concept of the "Mexican" contemporary artist. "As a Mexican artist, it can be difficult to escape the perceived *exotic*," explains Dávila. He then told us that he has always been skeptical of national identities, and has attempted to make his art more universal. "I am interested in international materials—these erase borders in a way," says Dávila in front of his sculptures. "The same steel beam, for example, in this piece, can be bought in the US, in Brazil, in India, wherever in the world."

While most of Dávila's materials are inherently global, selected components tether him to Mexico. For some of his sculptures he incorporates boulders found outside of his hometown of Guadalajara. Though these boulders are innately Mexican, in a way they are also global. "They are at once placeless, and completely of the location from which they were found," says Dávila.



Dávila reconciles his Mexican and international identities in his Los Angeles sculpture exhibition, *Sense of Place*. Commissioned and curated by the Los Angeles Nomadic Division (LAND), *Sense of Place* is a public sculpture exhibition that migrates and integrates into the diverse urban landscape of Los Angeles, drawing a portrait of the city's varied experiences and storied past. Beginning in September 2017, Dávila installed an 8 square-foot cube composed of 40 pieces of reinforced concrete in a West Hollywood park. Over the course of nine months, the form has been disassembled and scattered throughout diverse spaces in Los Angeles. At the end of the project in May 2018, the cube will be reassembled, "holding its travel histories in its reunited form." While the components of the cube are aesthetically placeless, they were produced in Guadalajara, Mexico.

Like many of Dávila's architecturally-influenced projects, *Sense of Place* is based on the deconstruction and disassembling of a structure. With an academic formation in architecture, Dávila often takes inspiration from iconic Mexican designers like Luis Barragán and Mathias Goeritz. Though he tries to distance himself from his Mexican identity, Dávila is constantly being drawn back to his national roots, whether through his explorations and deconstructions of Mexican modernism or through his use of Mexican materials.

It is in the pieces that examine both Mexico and the world beyond that Dávila is most successful as an artist. Like the components in *Sense of Place*, Dávila has been marked by his personal history and place of origin. He is at once aesthetically international, and deeply Guadalaran. Yet these tensions aren't negative or contradictory. Dávila thrives on tension, and harnesses its energy to posit himself as one of Mexico's most influential artists.

Written by Miller Schulman

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