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"Knife-Edge Equilibrium: An Interview with Mexican Artist Jose Dávila"

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BY CYNTHIA GARCIA | JANUARY 15, 2024



Jose Dávila, "Acapulco chair stack," 2021, metal, epoxy paint and boulders, 61.2" x 62.2" x 56.3"/Photo: Flavio Freire. Courtesy of the artist and Galeria Nara Roesler.

A balancing act is a concise attempt to explain the work of Mexican artist Jose Dávila, who shows for the first time in São Paulo. "Jose Dávila: Um pirata, um poeta, um peão e um rei" [A pirate, a poet, a pawn and a king] at Galeria Nara Roesler features around twenty works among installations, sculptures, paintings and drawings of the Guadalajara-born professional reputed to be one of Mexico's leading contemporary artists.

You may be wondering why the extra-long title. It refers to a lyric from Frank Sinatra's mid-1960s hit, "That's Life," with an uplifting message. Despite the ups and downs in life, we should not give up but remain positive, because soon we will be "back on top," inspiring words to have in mind in the new year:

I've been a puppet, a pauper, a pirate, a poet
A pawn and a king
I've been up and down and over and out
And I know one thing
Each time I find myself
Flat on my face
I pick myself up and get
Back in the race



Jose Dávila, installation view of "A pirate, a poet, a pawn and a king," 2023, the artist's first exhibition in Brazil/Photo: Flavio Freire. Courtesy Galeria Nara Roesler.

After all, life itself is the great balancing act and forty-nine-year-old Dávila is challenged, as he says, by the “unseen forces that shape our existence,” one of them being the laws of physics. The science that attracted the genius of Newton is vital for his work, in particular the law that rules what is known as mechanical equilibrium, the force that balances the stones and boulders in his sculptural work. However, in Dávila’s work these rocks are never sculpted nor carved but exposed *in natura* state in his superbly controlled, meticulously weighed, better said, well-balanced sculptures. In one such equilibrium-defying series he is known for, he assembles and stacks stones and boulders with an icon of Mexican design, the Acapulco chair, in floor and aerial sculptures.

Dávila has exhibited at top international institutions, such as the Centre Pompidou in Paris, the Kunsthalle Hamburg, Haus Konstruktiv in Zürich, the Sydney Biennale, Brazil’s Inhotim Centro de Arte Contemporânea, and now at Galeria Nara Roesler in São Paulo.

The artist begins 2024 with a January show at Sean Kelly Gallery in Los Angeles; in February he participates in the tenth-year commemorative exhibition of Casa Wabi at the remarkable headquarters designed by Japanese Pritzker Prize-winner architect Tadao Ando in Puerto Escondido, Mexico; in March, a residency in Tokyo; in April another show... The year kicks off with a good number of commitments for Jose Dávila.

The interview began personally when I met him at his São Paulo opening and continued in an exchange of emails and WhatsApp messages.



Mexican artist Jose Davila in his studio in Guadalajara/Photo: Agustín Arce. Courtesy of the artist and Galeria Nara Roesler.

Jose, you were an architecture student then you decided to embrace art professionally. What happened that changed your path to the visual arts?

I always had the idea and the concern to study art but ended up in architecture for several reasons. Right in the middle of my student years, I began doing some site-specific interventions with a group of friends who were also studying architecture, which led me to get more and more involved in art, then I got to know some curators and started doing shows... so, at the end of my architecture studies, the transition was organic, it was already set.

The Aztecs and Mayans had a deep connection to stonework in their art and splendid architecture. Would that be one of the factors that led you specifically to stone sculpture?

No, not at all. I like stone precisely because of its universal aspect rather than the cultural one. I like working with stones because they are what they are, and their symbolic meaning can be shared by anyone. I like to use stone in its natural form and shape, I do not use them as material to be carved or to be manipulated. I use them for their physical qualities. This doesn't mean I don't find Aztec or Mayan sculpture and architecture fascinating, it is just that my sculpture is neither influenced nor results from these two ancestral cultures.



Jose Dávila, "Personal diary," 2023, metal, wood, boulder, plaster, concrete, shovel, glass, and bricks, ed unique, 103.2" x 128" x 9.8"/Photo: Agustín Arce. Courtesy of the artist.

Your sculpture is, *a priori*, based on density and balance, aspects that are intimately related to the laws of physics.

My fascination with balance, gravity, and the laws of physics is deeply rooted in the fundamental principles that govern our physical world. These elements are not just scientific concepts; they are the invisible forces that shape our daily experiences and interactions with the material world.

In my sculptures and installations, I often explore the tension and harmony between these forces. By doing so, I aim to create a visual and conceptual dialogue about the nature of equilibrium and the delicate balance that exists in both the natural and built environments. My work frequently involves juxtaposing heavy materials with fragile supports or placing objects in seemingly precarious positions. This not only challenges the viewer's perception of stability and permanence but also reflects the inherent uncertainties and contradictions of life. The interplay of balance and gravity in my works is a metaphor for the human condition. Just as my sculptures often teeter on the edge of stability, so too do we as individuals navigate the delicate balance of our own lives, constantly adapting to the forces that act upon us. By exploring these concepts through my art, I invite viewers to contemplate their own relationship with the physical world and to consider the broader philosophical implications of balance and instability. In essence, my interest in these physical laws is more than an artistic preference; it's a way to probe deeper into the human experience, inviting reflection on the delicate and often unseen forces that shape our existence.



Jose Davila, "Joint effort," 2023, one way mirror, boulders and ratchet strap, ed. unique, 72.8" x 52" x 51.2"/Photo: Agustín Arce. Courtesy of the artist.

What are some of your influences in sculpture?

My influences are not limited to the visual arts alone. Physics and engineering principles also play a critical role in my work, particularly in understanding and manipulating balance and tension. These scientific fields provide a practical framework for experimenting with form and structure, allowing me to push the boundaries of what is possible in sculpture. I've been influenced by a great number of artists, some more directly related to my work and some not, inspiration often comes from people who work differently than I do. However, it's impossible not to mention Richard Serra, Lygia Clark, Barbara Hepworth, Robert Smithson, The Carnac stones, Isamu Noguchi, Phyllida Barlow, Rachel Whiteread, Henry Moore, Ulrich Rückriem....



Jose Dávila, "The fact of constantly returning to the same point or situation," 2023, silkscreen print and vinyl paint on loomstate linen, 82.7" x 135.4" x 2.4"/Photo: Agustín Arce. Courtesy of the artist.

In your paintings, your work blends constructivist art as well as optical art, doesn't it? Who are the artists you look up to in your canvas paintings?

I look to my own desire, I often use hints and history of art... but I don't consider making art the art of following hints, it sounds contradictory but it's not. I'm often attracted by the meticulous habit of research and trying to understand art history, and through this research I often end up configuring and composing artworks that make impossible relations a reality... like for example putting together in a painting of mine, circles by Ad Reinhardt, Bridget Riley, Duchamp, Hilma af Klint and Russian artist Lyubov Popova. I would like to stress that the artists who always caught my attention and I look after are the ones who push the limits and pick up the baton in expanding awe and what we understand as Art.

What is your advice for a beginning artist?

Work a lot, work a lot and work a lot. Try as many ideas as you can that come to your head. In that process you will begin to find which of these ideas come from outside and which ones are yours. Be strong, the path is not easy, and you need to stay motivated regarding the setbacks. Make art because you love doing it.

"Jose Dávila: Um pirata, um poeta, um peão e um rei" [A pirate, a poet, a pawn and a king]

Through February 10, 2024

[Galeria Nara Roesler](#), São Paulo

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