

## FERNANDO PALMA RODRÍGUEZ

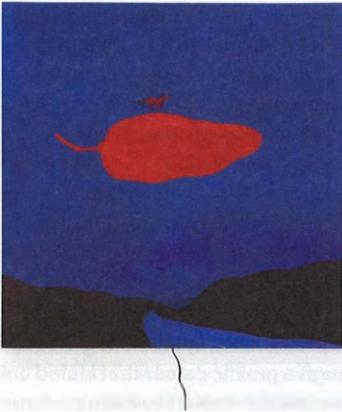
House of Gaga/Reena Spaulings Fine Art, Los Angeles, USA

Imagine a cross between the gas-powered lurch of a Survival Research Laboratories Battlebot and the uncanny footwork of the mechanical 'DARPA dog' by Boston Dynamics, a defence contractor, and you might get Fernando Palma Rodríguez's *Soldado* (2001). This piecemeal robot soldier resembles a metal kangaroo with a cardboard fox skull on its neck. It actually marches, both guided and constrained by a canvas strap. Electric motors do the work, but the tether channels the robot's movements into a shuffle. It steps in place, like Sisyphus, toward its lead, at the tangle of circuits and wires that powers it, as if trying to do itself in.

Palma Rodríguez's sculptures don't have skin; their viscera of wires and y-adapters spill across the floor. The joints are simple, too. You see how each sculpture works: here are the wheels; here's the motion sensor; there are the motors it triggers and the batteries that give it juice. Three shaggy, squat figures, *Los nahuales* (2017), surround a grave-like mound of soil: you can see the articulations and the motors that allow their spindly, selfie-stick arms to jerk along two axes. They are triggered but, even without an audience, the gallery hums with ambient twitching, with grinding, servo laughter. It's a co-ordinated act, the robots' little motions as much a kind of souvenir shamanism as the palm-leaf mats and segmented wooden snakes that form parts of their bodies.

These natural materials – wood, dirt, plant fibres – serve as tinted latex might on a humanoid dummy: the sculptures are cyborgian combos of mechanics and organic matter. *Coatlícue/Xipetotec* (2018), features a *metates* – a table-shaped grindstone – as if its stone head could hop its mount and scrape across some grain. When someone or something approaches, it causes a handful of toy snakes to writhe on little piles of debris. They aren't going anywhere either. Palma Rodríguez gives his work the power to move but not to travel. This is true even of *Xi mo matlazacan ce chece* (2006), in which aluminium A-frame ladders with attached lupine heads (two each) swipe in a 300-degree arc. This motion, more than that of any other work here, is violent and sudden; the motors zip;

health crises, such as the cholera  
as well as moral concerns:



the creatures clatter into one another; bits of dry wheat shake loose. Yet, each ladder retracts and resets every time, no more than a foot or two from where it started. The fact that the sculptures are leashed, simple and reactive – they don't 'behave' in any unprogrammed sense – sharpens the notion that this is a display of captive animals, even if wild, undead or immortal ones, and encourages the viewer to feel kinship with the superior, zoo-making species.

And yet, like a hallucination begging for significance, the acrylic painting *Tetzahualiztli* (2016) depicts a tiny horse on a big red chilli hovering in the sky. The piece plays one of pictorial art's oldest tricks: a road leads the viewer into the scene, under the spectral pepper, toward pinholes of blue light – LEDs creeping through punctures in the canvas. It's a granular picture of a city in a notch of the slight, electrified dusk; and the viewers, of course, will never reach it – no matter how long they march toward their tether. Likewise *Michin huan quimichtin* (2016): rendered in car paint, a cartoonish, grinning tomcat outlined in black, pinning a mouse by its tail. Which represents the viewer, and which the art?

Travis Diehl

**This page  
Above**

Fernando Palma Rodríguez, *Los nahuales*, 2017, palm mat, carved stone, cables, dirt, electronic circuits and sensors, dimensions variable

Fernando Palma Rodríguez, *Tetzahualiztli*, 2016, acrylic on chipboard, electronic circuits and LED, 79 × 79 × 3 cm