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Fernando Palma Rodríguez

HOUSE OF GAGA

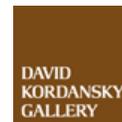


Fernando Palma Rodríguez, *Quetzalcóatl*, 2016, mixed media. Installation view. Photo: Omar Luis Olguin.

"We would reach a better understanding of the world," says Fernando Palma Rodríguez, "if we accepted the indigenous concept of *person* that does not limit itself to individuals but that is also conferred to nature, animals, and human beings as a whole." The works that made up Palma Rodríguez's most recent exhibition, "*Totlalhuan, Mictlantecuhtli, Chak-ek, Kan*" (Our Land, Lord of the Underworld, Venus, Sky), fuse vision and language in the manner of an ancient codex. In Nahuatl—as opposed to many Western languages—grammatical subjects aren't central to oral communication. Even the verb *to be* quickly becomes unnecessary and redundant: Since things and beings already *are*, there is no need to emphasize their existence. A person's presence can be conveyed through the combination of different concepts, the immanence of which is frequently untranslatable. With that in mind, our understanding of the natural elements, discarded objects, mechanical parts, and industrial debris that form Palma Rodríguez's sculptures becomes rather instinctive, stirring our senses to perceive what the gestures performed by these humble automata might communicate before they eventually fall into extinction.

The central piece in the exhibition, *Quetzalcóatl*, 2016, represents the feathered serpent, god of vegetation, renewal, and warfare that descended to Mictlan—the underworld in Aztec mythology—to fight and defeat Mictlantecuhtli in order to bring back the corn that feeds humans. The motorized sculpture is made of cardboard, a worker's boot, and native criollo corn cobs and dyed leaves harvested in Palma Rodríguez's land in Milpa Alta, on the outskirts of Mexico City. In a country that today imports half the corn it consumes from the United States, criollo corn is turning into a chromatic rarity threatened by transgenic maize. Here, the erratic movements of the serpent's severed body literally gestured toward the huge amounts of energy squandered by the entropic society we live in. An earlier version of the sculpture incorporated forty-three rattles made from misshapen cobs, a semi-veiled reference to the forty-three missing students from the southwestern city of Iguala who have come to symbolize Mexico's fundamental lack of human rights and criminal justice.

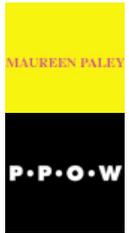
Milpa Alta is one of the most traditional areas in Mexico City's southern fringe, in part because it has an agriculture-based economy, which also makes it an ecological bastion that provides much of the water that flows into the capital. Palma Rodríguez is interested not only in preserving the ancestral culture he descends from, but, more importantly, in reinvesting its legacies in order to envision a different kind of future: "Art's ideal purpose," he says, "is aspiring to free the imagination from the constrictions of social, political, environmental, or economic inertia that are driving us to self-destruction." A suspended sculpture such as *Aqua*, 2015, points to precisely that kind of liberation of creative power. The piece inconspicuously transfigures the gourds that are normally used to store and transport water into what appear to be flying creatures, each flanked by two hand-shaped cutouts simulating a pair of wings that open and close, grasping their bodies and releasing them again to an uncharted journey—a journey, one suspects, back to Totlalhuan, as the letters of a bright-orange neon sign strategically placed next to the sculpture suggest. The characters transcribe the Nahuatl concept of "our land" and manage to subvert the contemporary (urban) cultural codes of global capitalism by making them undecipherable to a Western reader. The painting *Michin huan quimichtin* (Cat and Mouse), 2016, depicts an indolent, bullying feline stealing a mouse's school backpack; the cat's expression recalls the floating smile of the elusive Cheshire cat of Wonderland. The image stands as yet another reference to contemporary Mexican politics and to the recent massive demonstrations by teachers' unions, but it also might be a nod to Chris Marker's opening



sequence in *A Grin Without a Cat* (1977/1993): The old revolutionary impulses we hope to renew remain suspended in thin air. For it is not without a whiff of nostalgia that Palma Rodríguez's fantastical creatures envisage obscurity and destruction as a time of change and rebirth that, the artist believes, can still lend some hope to an uncertain future.

—*Magalí Arriola*

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