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Thyssen-Bornemisza Art Contemporary The Commissions Book

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ABRAHAM CRUZVILLEGAS
AUTORRETRATO QUERIENDO SER FRAY TOMÁS GONZÁLEZ Y ESCUCHANDO ABAJEÑOS CON LA BANDA DE ZACÁN, INCAPAZ DE COMUNICAR LA FRUSTRACIÓN DE NO PODER RECONOCERME COMO UN NARCISO IRACUNDO, POBRE, OBEDIENTE, CASTO Y PARA ACABARLA DE CHINGAR, DESPLAZADO, 2014

WOOD, IRON, MIRROR, NYLON ROPE, LEATHER, CONCRETE, ALUMINUM, GALVANIZED IRON, SELF-ADHESIVE TAPE, RUBBER, AND CORNCOB
800 × 469 × 570 CM

The title of *Self-portrait wanting to be Fray Tomás González and listening to abajeños with the Zacán band, unable to communicate the frustration of not being able to recognize myself as a wrathful, poor, obedient, chaste and to fucking top it off, displaced narcissist*, is allegorical, an insight into Abraham Cruzvillegas's practice. This large-scale installation is part of his ongoing series *Autoconstrucción* (Self-construction), a term he uses to describe his sculptural practice as a methodology of adaptation and assemblage driven by a self-constructed process of production, making use of available materials and resources at a given location, in given circumstances. For Cruzvillegas, looking at and making through this lens of the self-made is a reference to his personal history—he grew up in a home which was altered several times to meet the needs of his family, adding rooms or accessibility ramps—and to the construction of identity, both his own identity and a cultural identity. In *Autorretrato queriendo ser Fray Tomás González*, Cruzvillegas comes to terms with his personal shortcomings in the face of the good deeds of Fray Tomás González, a monk and migrants' rights activist who founded a shelter and center for migrants called La 72 in southern Mexico and has fought against the ill treatment of migrants who travel through Mexico on their way to the US. As the title describes, Cruzvillegas contemplates this while listening to traditional Mexican folk music, and realizes that beyond his deep respect for the friar, he is also a "displaced" person who could need the friar's help. One of the artist's ancestors was connected to the Franciscan convent in Zapopan, Mexico, and the work is made entirely of materials found in the rubble there. Cruzvillegas's works result from this kind of personal attachment and their materials are sourced from places somehow significant to this personal aspect.

Commissioned by Thyssen-Bornemisza Art Contemporary for the exhibition "Atopia - Migration, Heritage and Placelessness," at the Museo de Arte de Zapopan, Mexico, May 14–October 5, 2014, curated by Daniela Zyman and Valentina Gutiérrez.

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ABRAHAM CRUZVILLEGAS, **AUTORRETRATO QUERIENDO SER FRAY TOMÁS GONZÁLEZ Y ESCUCHANDO ABAJEÑOS CON LA BANDA DE ZACÁN, INCAPAZ DE COMUNICAR LA FRUSTRACIÓN DE NO PODER RECONOCERME COMO UN NARCISO IRACUNDO, POBRE, OBEDIENTE, CASTO Y PARA ACABARLA DE CHINGAR, DESPLAZADO**, 2014, DETAIL
INSTALLATION VIEW, MUSEO DE ARTE DE ZAPOPAN, GUADALAJARA, MEXICO, 2014

ABRAHAM CRUZVILLEGAS
AUTORRETRATO FRONTERIZO Y CHISPEANTE ABRAZANDO EL RETRATO DE GILBERTO BOSQUES,
ESCUCHANDO PIREKUAS Y TRAGANDO ESQUITES AFUERA DE LA CATEDRAL, 2014
IRON, ALUMINUM, WOOD, GROSGRAIN, RUBBER, AND STAINLESS STEEL
725 x 950 x 557 CM

Like many of Abraham Cruzvillegas's artworks, *Self-portrait bordered, sparkled, embracing the portrait of Gilberto Bosques, listening to pirekuas and eating esquites outside the cathedral* was composed using materials the artist found in a particular location, in this case, collected near the Museo de Arte de Zapopan, in Guadalajara, Mexico, the site of the exhibition where the work was first shown. Formally, the work is comprised of two material clusters that have dialogic relation to one another. One protrudes upward with a slender, reed-like shape weighted down by a stack of concrete tiles. The other is a collection of slender metal and wooden bars arranged like sparks, or the rosette leaves of an agave plant shooting outward and upward from a central point. This piece is one of Cruzvillegas's series "Autorretrato" and, as the title suggests, involves the artist reflecting on the Mexican diplomat Gilberto Bosques (1892–1995). Before beginning his diplomatic work, Bosques served as a leftist legislator and combatant during the Mexican Revolution. During one of his stations as a consul in Marseille in the 1940s, Bosques took it upon himself to rescue several thousand exiled Spanish Republicans and Jews, assuring they were not sent back to Spain or to Nazi Germany. However, he did not receive much praise for his heroic actions and was largely unknown internationally until several years after his death, when his history was resurrected and his actions celebrated. In 1944, he said about his efforts: "I followed the policy of my country, of material and moral support to the heroic defenders of the Spanish Republic, the stalwart paladins of the struggle against Hitler, Mussolini, Franco, Pétain, and Laval." Cruzvillegas created an artwork to honor Bosques's legacy and to somehow enter into a personal dialogue with the historical figure.

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ABRAHAM CRUZVILLEGAS, **AUTORRETRATO FRONTERIZO Y CHISPEANTE ABRAZANDO EL RETRATO DE GILBERTO BOSQUES, ESCUCHANDO PIREKUAS Y TRAGANDO ESQUITES AFUERA DE LA CATEDRAL**, 2014

INSTALLATION VIEW, CENTRO CULTURAL METROPOLITANO, QUITO, ECUADOR, 2016

The act of creating sculpture must always take into account form, technique, material, and the context within which the work is to be seen. This condition has not changed in thousands of years. The practice of the discipline had an important inflection point, however, with the irruption of the readymade in the early twentieth century. The possibility of “making” three-dimensional works with industrial objects implies the construction of a complex frame of understanding. The act of recycling a product to imbue it with new value has a powerful consequence: the construction of a device of open-ended use, which, once reconfigured, allows for different interpretations. Therefore a readymade implies the symbolic charge of matter but, above all and fundamentally, the resignification of a previously codified object. This provocative gesture was first articulated in the work of the French artist Marcel Duchamp (1887–1968), and since then sculpture has been opened up to explore a very rich field of possibilities, which have radically transformed this artistic practice and changed its overall morphology. The term *garbage* is understood as anything that, having been used totally or partially and having fulfilled its most logical function, is disposed of. Today consumers of mass-produced objects remove from their surroundings everything that has ceased to seduce them. Garbage is therefore what remains of a capitalist society, which explains why it is removed and relocated to “special” places so that we may pretend that it no longer exists. The tragic aspect of these operations of massive consumption is that in record time they shift from a fascination with the “new” to a lack of interest in the “used.” With- in the context of neoliberalism, garbage plays a double role. On the one hand, its abundance across large geographic areas is causing considerable damage to the environment, and on the other, the waste generated by the capitalist elite has become a means of livelihood for the most disadvantaged classes. The latter is of particular interest as it constitutes the basis for the survival of a vast sector of the population. The vast majority of these disadvantaged classes have also settled in areas with the least urban infrastructure, plots of land where the population is deprived of the most basic services. These are the famous *favelas*. This Portuguese word, used in Brazil to refer to the poorest settlements, has gained popularity over the last several years and has been adopted by other languages. *Favelas* are made with the waste of the more privileged classes; dwellings are constructed by groups of ordinary people from garbage and discarded materials gathered over time. In this process of collective labor, the most rudimentary houses are in a way the most valuable. As a result, *favelas* are always at the very limit of their possibilities; they are fragile, but they represent a shield.

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The work of the Mexican artist Abraham Cruzvillegas is directly related to this practice. In 2004, the artist initiated a body of work that he called *Autoconstrucción* (Self-construction), which considers all the issues regarding waste, recycling, and poverty that I have mentioned above. In his work, sculpture and performance are combined in a creative undertaking, highlighting a social practice that has its genesis in physical labor. This work stems from the need to construct a structure to protect you and your family from inclement weather and the symbolic need for a home. Born in Mexico City in 1968, Cruzvillegas studied pedagogy at the Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México. His solid university education, his analytical skills, and his astonishing intellectual rigor, as well as a strong sense of community, have led him to be especially concerned about subjects related to the common good. Perhaps that is why, from a very early age, he has dedicated part of his time to education and projects that involve audience participation. In addition to sculpture, he has developed his artistic practice in other disciplines, including drawing, painting, performance, and video. This wide variety of media has given his work considerable freedom and flexibility.

The TBA21 collection includes five works by Cruzvillegas that explore the idea of *autoconstrucción*. The group consists of four large-format works made with recycled materials and one work from the *Autorretrato ciego* (Blind self-portrait) series made with found pieces of printed paper. In *Blind self-portrait looking through the window after some minutes of mutual oral sex* (2012), we can see an ensemble of clippings, some from brochures and mass-circulation magazines, which the artist has painted on one side with one of two colors, pink or gray. By doing this, he has hidden the information contained on one side of these irregularly shaped rectangles with acrylic paint, and by installing them on a wall using rudimentary nails and pins with the painted side facing outward, he has also hidden the unpainted side. The implicit contradiction in this installation system is complete. We cannot see the information contained on these pieces of paper because each side of the paper is either completely obscured by paint or hidden by the flat surface of the wall. Nonetheless the grouping is visually pleasing because it plays with the regularity and arrangement of the two colors across a large wall. It can be assembled in different configurations, but it has to be organized in a way that respects its elliptical shape. The other four sculptures in the collection were constructed in an improvised manner. They are assemblages made with materials found on the street, common objects that have been recycled and brought together based on the possibilities dictated by their unique shapes. But they have also been organized according to happenstance and the artist’s eye at the moment that each element was assembled. Although they are large, they are lighter than they appear, as they are full of air and empty space. Two of these works are self-portraits, and their titles

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describe what the artist was reading, listening to, or researching at the time they were created. For example, one work is titled *Autorretrato queriendo ser Fray Tomás González y escuchando abajeños con la banda de Zacán, incapaz de comunicar la frustración de no poder reconocermme como un narciso iracundo, pobre, obediente, casto y, para acabarla de chingar, desplazado* (Self-portrait wanting to be Fray Tomás González and listening to *abajeños* with the Zacán band, unable to communicate the frustration of not being able to recognize myself as a wrathful, poor, obedient, chaste and to fucking top it off, displaced narcissist). In this work he mentions a Franciscan friar who is the director of La 72, a shelter for immigrants in the Mexican state of Tabasco. The work includes a piece of steel rebar that is more than eighteen and a half feet tall, which, at its end, holds a small loudspeaker. The mention of Fray Tomás González and the loudspeaker allude to the stream of immigrants crossing Mexico to reach the United States, a problem that has been on the agenda of the many failed negotiations between those two countries. Another example is *Autorretrato fronterizo y chispeante abrazando el retrato de Gilberto Bosques, escuchando pirekuas y tragando esquites afuera de la catedral* (Self-portrait bordered, sparkled, embracing the portrait of Gilberto Bosques, listening to *pirekuas* and eating *esquites* outside the cathedral). Both sculptures date to 2014, but in the latter example the artist is referring to a Mexican diplomat stationed in France who saved the lives of more than thirty thousand refugees during World War II.

The other two works in the TBA21 collection are formally related to the self-portrait sculptures, but here the artist does not make a direct allusion to his own identity. One is titled *Boogie Woogie (handmade & sensual)* and the other *Chicas Patas Boogie (sweaty & needy)*, both from 2012. Despite the crudity of its materials, the first is almost a musical image as it is made with two long steel bars bent in a consistent sequence to produce could be called a “rhythmic” shape, creating structural arches from which hang long pieces of stamped fabric. The second sculpture is made with irregularly bent steel bars that form a metallic knot and which, right at the center, hold a feather headdress and skewered pieces of rotting animal meat. This is not the first time that the artist has created a “nest” that shelters organic elements. Everything exists in the world of trash, including stable and lasting materials as well as organic and biodegradable ones, like food. These assemblages demonstrate the wide spectrum of detritus, presenting both strong objects made from industrial materials as well as others that are perishable and have a very short life span. This group of artworks allows us to elucidate the key ideas that have inspired the artist from the very beginning of his prolific career, which are an essential part of his philosophy. **Poverty:** We can speak of poverty when a person or an entire community cannot satisfy basic needs such as food, shelter, health care, drinking water,

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ABRAHAM CRUZVILLEGAS, *BOOGIE WOOGIE (HANDMADE & SENSUAL)*, 2012

electricity, and medicine. **Injustice:** Instances of unfairness or violations of rights can occur in relation to an event, an act, or a situation. Injustice must therefore be considered with regard to a subject or a social group. Although this concept is framed differently by different judicial systems, “common sense” confers on it a certain degree of universality. Thus, in one way or another, every individual can pass judgment in a spontaneous manner.

Survival: In biology, medicine, and statistics, we have different conceptions of it, such as Darwin’s evolutionism, the random processes of death, and the elements regulated by genes. In any case survival should also be understood from the perspective of economic migration, in which how people live—with scarcity of food, water, and health care—is made manifest.

Recycling: Submitting objects to a process of transformation so that they can be used again prevents the loss of potentially useful materials, reduces water and air pollution, reduces the consumption of new raw materials, and prevents the wasteful use of energy and the emission of greenhouse gases. As a creative act, recycling establishes connections, relations, and complex collaborations between shapes and elements from different backgrounds.

Force: The energy, power, or capacity that a determined actor (or element) manifests when it modifies or stores the state of “something,” force is also, in very general terms, the capacity to realize any given action. Therefore force is the capacity to do a job or cause movement. In the realm of physics it is a vector quantity that measures the change in the linear movement between two particles or systems of particles. Based on this concept, we must therefore understand as a potential force every agent with the capacity to modify the movement or shape of different materials. In politics, however, force is generally the power to move social, cultural, and economic structures in a given direction.

Resistance: Although its traditional definition describes it as the action of standing firm against an acting force, in reality this term must be understood more specifically as the expression of a structure that stands firm in opposition to an external force. Therefore resistance is the need to maintain a stable structural unity against the attack of an opposing force. In the field of physics, resistance refers to an element’s capacity to resist an electric current. In the political and social realms, resistance is the capacity to retain a means of organization against the pressure produced by an opposing force. In all cases, resistance appears to be the articulation of a total difference.

Self-Portrait: Because the subject represented in a self-portrait and the person who has executed it are one and the same, this genre constitutes an exercise of profound self-analysis, one in which the work’s creator wishes to portray him or herself, revealing a unique essence. In this case identity enters an extended and very elaborate exercise of psychological self-construction.

Through his antimonuments, which can be termed

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sculptures of marginality, Cruzvillegas has identified areas of resistance that demonstrate the symbolic force held by things that are at the limit of their material capacity. By representing himself as a great engineer of the precarious and a calculator of the unstable, he connects an array of industrial elements that are almost never used together but that now, in this aleatory and experimental exercise, finally unite. This contradiction is a small reflection of the systems of production and consumption, of the paradoxes of a fierce and ruthless capitalism that has now forced its way into the most remote areas of the world.

Sculpture and garbage converge in these handmade works of *autoconstrucción*, allowing for many objects to remain in perfect union and balance: old pieces of metal, cheap furniture legs, extinct home appliances, archaic computers, tire rims that have been deformed by use, corn husks, chunks of peyote, and pieces of rusty pipe. We can also see recycled wood, burned plastic, bent metal, broken fiberglass, ripped cardboard, political pamphlets, and unraveling textiles. These readymade *favelas* demonstrate not only the chaos and disarray that dominate a trash pile but also, and in a contradictory manner, a sense of symmetry and elegance in their compositions. The beauty that emerges from these works is rooted in *ethics*, as this is the only way to approach contemporary art if we want to speak responsibly about sculpture and especially if we want to address the role that “contemporary monuments” should fulfill within a system filled with superficial stimuli.

There is also a performative aspect that we shouldn’t pass by. Labor is part of the production of these artworks, the physical work and the collaboration between the individuals that help to construct them. Each action necessarily has to carry a mass of material and does so with corporeal movement, a consequence of changing the position of the hands, arms, torso, and legs. Recycling something implies exploiting it, even after it has fulfilled its natural function. It also implies subjecting it to a cultural recodification process. Therefore readymades that are activated from the abundant waste of our society, the overwhelming garbage accumulated in urban and industrial areas, reflect the idiosyncrasy of our contemporary production system, revealing the role of each player: the entrepreneur, the laborer, the sales clerk, the politician, and the greatest victim of this complex cycle, the regular consumer.

Cruzvillegas’s improvised structures made with recycled products without a doubt constitute a good example of this process. These monumental assemblages portray action, collaboration, production, and consumption. They also imply a radical declaration, a call to reassess our society. Cruzvillegas believes that we have to resist and always stand firm: always, even if we are standing on one leg; always, even if we are held together only by a thin wire; always, even if the pillars that support our house are made of silk and fragile feathers. Through his works we understand that self-construction is the art of resisting everything.

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