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Mateo López

Colombia



Every art critic's favourite map is the Bellman's Map of the Ocean, which appears as a navigating tool onboard a ship in Lewis Carroll's 'The Hunting of the Snark' (1874–6). 'He had bought a large map representing the sea,' Carroll's rhyme goes, 'Without the least vestige of land: / And the crew were much pleased when they found it to be / A map they could all understand.' The map turns out to be a blank piece of paper, a clean slate, the ultimate terra incognita. And from catalogue essays to reviews, it's cited time and time again (curator Hans Ulrich Obrist's 2014 compendium *Mapping It Out* being one of the most recent). On the one hand you might think this critical obsession is ironic, given the extent to which the average art critic's job seems to be about making sure all the blanks are filled in, and on the other hand perhaps it's not because a critic *looks* for the blank waiting to be filled in. But this isn't about art critics. It's about Mateo López. An artist who was based in Bogotá, but now, when ArtReview is focusing on Colombia, has moved to New York (for three years, at least, while his wife is studying there). But that's OK. He too works with blanks to be filled in. And in any case, travel has been one of the primary generators of his work. "When you get to a place, you are a stranger," the artist says, "and you are kind of a ghost at the same time. You are absorbing information, trying to understand, and little by little you go through the different layers of the place. I believe the way you answer to situations and places is the same way your work answers to situations and places. It is you talking through matter."

My first encounter with López's work was in itself an encounter with something of a blank: his *Casa Desorientada* (*Disoriented House*, 2013), made in collaboration with architect Lucas Oberlaender, is a giant plywood box measuring 4.83 by 4.83 by 3.3 metres (each side featuring 12 square wooden panels, the roof having a span of 16), which was installed on the booth of his Colombian gallery, Casas Riegner, at that year's Art Basel in Switzerland. And when I say on the booth, to all intents and purposes it was the booth, filling it almost completely, obviously itself a container and not so obviously the booth's content (because other than the container – albeit very beautifully constructed – nothing else seemed to be on show). A perfect summation of what a temporary art-fair booth is, it nevertheless stood out from the showier works on the stands around it (on booths that provide punters with the strip but not the tease) for having something of the look of a giant, but blank, Rubik's cuboid. A puzzle, then; and perfect fodder for the hungry critic.

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Although this estate doesn't incorporate any of the land you'd normally connect with the term – last year, at Bogotá's ARTBO, the work, which was inspired by the artist's travels to Canada and San Andrés island in the Caribbean Sea, just off Colombia, and the stories he heard about poor settlers in Newfoundland being evicted and having to turn their houses into ships or moving between islands in floating dwellings, was installed in the middle of

a lake in the city's Botanical Gardens. In a sense the idea of a home became performative rather than inert, both in relation to its shifting locations and its prospective inhabitants (indeed, during ARTBO it was the site for a dance performance by Rafael Duarte).

López himself studied architecture for two years, before switching to art. "I thought it was going to be an interlude," he says, "but I never went back. Paper and cardboard were somehow the resources available, and drawing and sculpture became bigger concerns. I continued exploring the sphere of ideas that surround the meaning of architecture. Once Johann Wolfgang von Goethe called architecture 'frozen music'; then Quincy Jones says: if architecture is frozen music, then music must be liquid architecture. I think for me, the transition of matter is more interesting than the actual definition, to find myself between art and architecture." While *Casa Desorientada* conjures associations with early-twentieth-century architectural experiments such as Le Corbusier's obsession with the ideally proportioned Modulor living space or R. Buckminster Fuller's mass-production *Dymaxion House* (1930), and even the critical architecture of a 1960s outfit (that worked primarily on paper) such as Italy's Superstudio, López's work some-



above *Casa Desorientada (Disoriented House)*, 2013.

Photo: Sebastiano Pellion preceding pages *Casa Desorientada (Disoriented House)*, 2013.

Photo: Julián Roldán

how insists on remaining at once an idea and a reality. Like a child's chemistry experiment, it comes in a box, but ends up going everywhere.

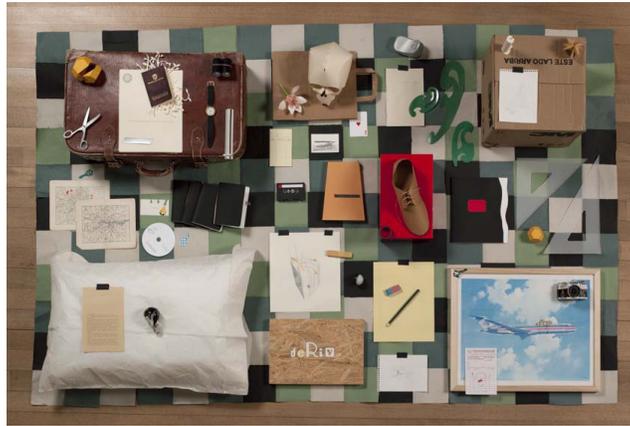
The suggestion that home or the studio is something you take with you has long (if 'long' is a word you can use of an artist who today is still under forty) been a theme in López's work. In 2006, for the exhibition *Adentro y en Medio (Inside and In Between)* at Casas Riegner in Bogotá, López recreated his studio in the gallery, and worked in it throughout the duration of the show, making three-dimensional paper reproductions of objects from his 'real' studio in Bogotá. The exhibition served to collapse production, reproduction, the virtual and the actual (yes, we live in a digital age), and notions of the original and the copy into an interchangeable, constantly oscillating single entity. "I got to learn the history of art from slides, books, magazines and a lot of photocopies," López says, "so my memory is much more about reproduction and blurred back-and-white versions of what you find in the museums."

At this point I'd introduce López for what he really is: a draughtsman. But that doesn't tell half the story. Sure, he always keeps a sketchbook in his pocket (which he describes both as being like an image bank and as containing ideas for drawings), but many of his works expand the notion of drawing as it is commonly perceived. López's 2007 exhibition *Topografía Anecdótica (Anecdotal Topography)*, also at Casas Riegner, expanded on a previous project from earlier in the year, *Diario de Motocicleta (Motorcycle Diary)*, which is both a travelling exhibition that took place at venues in Cali and Medellín, and a record of López's journey from Bogotá to those venues: the exhibitions were generated while the artist travelled around Colombia (and both cities) on a 2,153km trip by Vespa with a 'portable studio' – two changes of clothes, notebooks, music, a camera, a tripod and a camera lucida – strapped to its back. The studio was an artwork in itself, titled *Portable Workshop No 25 (2007)*, and the artworks that artwork generated became the shows, while the scooter itself was installed both in the earlier shows and *Topografía Anecdótica*. With López a narrative generates another narrative, and one work flows into the next.

There's a nod, here, of course to Ernesto Che Guevara and his journal of a coming-of-age (both physically and politically) trip around Latin America during the 1950s, as López explores and documents the world around him. But the project is also about technique and has closer connections with another book, David Hockney's *Secret Knowledge (2001)*, in which the British painter proposes that early Renaissance masters used a combination of science (camera obscuras, camera lucidas) and artistry to achieve their greatest works. As much as they tell a narrative, these works are about a certain degree of skill and precision. Alongside maps and photographs, plants and found objects, the works (all 2007) collected in *Topografía*

Anecdótica include a Camera Dirkon, a printed cardboard pinhole camera, rolls of 3M tape and drawing tools made of paper, a replica 3M cardboard box and pin-and-paper dolls. And that's merely to scratch the surface. There's also a croissant that appears to be made of a single, rolled piece of beige paper; a wood and enamel lollipop; *Cartas Cruzadas* – two brown envelopes folded at tight angles so that, brought together, they form across. Next to that, in the exhibition catalogue, is a photograph of two paper-wrapped bars of soap positioned in front of a hotel mirror in such a way that they too look like they're forming a similar-looking cross. All in all, López comes across as a mixture of the German naturalist Alexander von Humboldt, who between 1799 and 1804 travelled through Latin America, describing it for the first time from a 'modern scientific point of view' (as part of more than 30 volumes of travel writings), an English grand-tourist swanning through the ruins of classical Italy and a sixteenth-century Spaniard, reeking of salt water and man-sweat, grinning and waving a potato at a puzzled European farmer. Everything is at once as ordinary as it is extraordinary, and all of it presents the notion of an artist who uses his skill to consume and then excrete and then reingest the world around him, to construct a contingent, but present reality. "What you process comes from the outside world," López says. "You take it inside the studio, transform, wrap and put it back. It is like the Chinese whispers game (or broken telephone), a continued chain that someone can reveal or continue deconstructing." Within that, drawing becomes a line for connecting experiences, apparently random objects, memories, the subjective to the objective, and the act of creation to the fact of existence.

Ultimately there's something about López's work that reminds me of the Italian TV series *La Linea (1971–86)*, which featured a man, drawn in a single continuous outline, who walked along the seemingly infinite extension of that line, encountering and overcoming a series of objects and obstacles that rose out of the same endless line. Like that line, López's work manages to offer up something that is inert yet vital, framed but continuous, and the site, to drag in another architectural theory (this time completely out of context), for immensely complex, yet nevertheless entertaining (and pleasure is definitely an important element in the experience of this work), animate form. ar



Nowhere Man, 2011.
Photo: Oscar Monsalve



Casa Desorientada (Disoriented House – Furniture and Objects), 2013
(installation view, 43rd Salón (Inter) Nacional de Artistas, Medellín,
2013). Photo: Julián Roldán all works Courtesy Casas Riegner, Bogotá