

Jonathan Hernández

# **GALERIA NACIONAL**

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February 4 -April 4, 2020

Throughout a career spanning more than 20 years, Jonathan Hernández (Mexico City 1972) has consistently created works in tension with the geographical, social, political, and cultural context where he develops his practice. More often than not, this tension is manifested in an arch that goes from bitter humor to stark political satire. The constant journey between the two points certainly generates an art that is fascinating because of its precise dissection of reality, its use of humorous signs that invite us to bear that reality, and a certain melancholic longing for the world that could be.

For *Galería Nacional* (National Gallery), his first solo exhibition at Proyecto Paralelo, Hernández brought together a group of works that explicitly reference Mexico's political, social, and cultural situation. Although most of the pieces included are recent works that address present conditions, the show also features some meaningful pieces from the past as well as an archive with documents and ephemera covering the last 25 years. As a whole, the exhibition shows a consistent line, not only in Hernández's concerns and approaches but also regarding the nature of the country's problems. Here, these problems no longer appear as simple reiterations —as more of the same— but as a single long continuum that reveals a specific way of being, thinking, and operating that is transmitted from one sphere to the next.

The sense of frailty and the precariousness that are a constant in the artist's work traverse the exhibition—which includes photographs, objects, collages, and sculptures—and reflect our condition as transient beings. Hernández playful use of language reveals the relations between the works and their possible meanings. By adding a sense of humor to these elements, Hernández allows us to approach his subject matter without falling into utter despair, and in doing so, he also proves that the only way to establish a minimum relation to power structures is by dissecting them with the clinical eye of the comedian. Thus, humor pierces through the image of power and the power of images in a gesture that dissolves hierarchies and their purported relevance.

Jonathan Hernández confronts us with a mirror—it is not by chance that he has often resorted to this material—that locates us as subjects at the center of the naked reality that he displays before us. If it is true that many of these pieces have to be read as pertaining to specific situations and characters, it is only when we visualize the exhibition as a whole and establish the connections between some of the pieces that we may account for how such specificities add up until they achieve a properly historical dimension. The way in which Hernández weaves this historicity evidences the tricky dynamics between individuals and society that, to a large extent, allow the *status quo* to persist.

The artist book *Campaña Nacional de Reforestación* has been published on occasion of the exhibition.

Jonathan Hernández analyses the ways in which images circulate and are commodified in the context of subjects such as human behavior, communication or the clash between urban landscape and natural environment. With a mix of humor and fierce criticism, Hernández invites us into a dialogue that questions the machinery and system of political power. His work incorporates images and texts from many sources—newspapers, advertising, books, postcards— that he re-makes in the form of publications, collages, books, posters or exhibition projects. For more than two decades he has worked with images from the press in a potentially infinite archive based on different iconographic categories. He also makes sculptural work that points to specific associations through minimal gestures. From his early work Hernández has critically parodied social structures and the intricacies of power, while also generating a more intimate form of artistic expression that delves into the poetic aspects of existence within society. Photographs, videos, texts, music, references to contemporary art, nicknames, private and personal jokes, all are part of his work and strengthen its discourse.

## WORKS IN THE EXHIBITION



**Blind Self-Portrait:**  
*"the world of art is part of an economy of specialization and production of social relations that materialize in exhibitions, conferences, residencies, vernissages, hommages, VIP parties and introductions. These links and the networks they form are more important than the artworks or the projects themselves, thus, the art world is a context and a social network of distribution."*  
2019

Selfie stick and bronze cast with gold bath  
104 x 12 x 12 cm



**Imposture** (A title in an indigenous language would have been better)  
2019

Plastic chair, cold gravel, broom stick, fragment of drainage pipe, hook and exhibition catalogue  
173 x 150 x 150 cm



**Playback**  
2019

Bronze plaque on foam and curtains  
210 x 200 x 24 cm



**National Tree-planting Campaign**  
2015-2019

Collage of 100 color photographs on cardboard  
180 x 133 x 6.5 cm



**National Palace**  
2019

Collage on cardboard  
148 x 211 x 6 cm



**Lost in Montreal**  
1995-2019

Collage of archival material and documentation of the action that took place in Montreal in 1995  
74 x 106 x 5 cm



**Image Industry**  
2018-2019

Puzzle of the *Detroit Industry* mural (Diego Rivera, 1933) interwoven with a 500 pesos note  
57 x 80 x 4 cm



**Emotional Map of México**  
2019

Labels and fragments of broken beer bottles on cardboard  
70 x 100 x 5 cm



**Nail and dirt**  
2019

Enamel on mirror  
43 x 35 x 4 cm



**The Impertinence of Belonging**  
2019

30 name tags and clothes hanger  
155 x 27 x 6 cm



**Mass and Power**  
2019

Mirror, cardboard and plastic cockroaches  
85 x 85 x 85 cm



**National Archive**  
In process

Documentation from the personal archive of the artist gathered from 1995 to date

**ISSA BENITEZ:**

What is Galería Nacional and how is it related to your practice as a whole? Obviously, it's not an anthological show but it does include more than 25 years of work. I would like you to tell me a little about how that period fits in your work, and—more specifically—about how you have approached your practice from the start. After all, your career has gone hand in hand with a process through which “Mexican” art was internationalized and became more visible. I feel it is interesting to see that process unravels in an exhibition that includes so many years of practice featuring works that specifically address the local context.

**JONATHAN HERNÁNDEZ:**

After making a pause in my art practice and re-thinking my working methods...my ways of being and existing...I liked the idea of recovering ways of working that I had left aside. I started going through all the stuff that I have been keeping for a long time, and I realized there was a constant presence of ephemera in every size as well as postcards and other paradoxical objects regarding a supposed Mexican identity, of “Mexicanness” as an invention or a product. That review provided me with the guidelines to think about making Galería Nacional, an exhibition about the monumental contradictions and grandiloquence that characterizes us. Unlike previous exhibitions where I had already addressed some of the neuralgic points surrounding this topic, this time around I was interested in thinking about the Mexican landscape as a dislocated space, one that has been fractured, undone, fucked up, while it is still assimilated to normality; a place where the persistence of the revolution is the eternal motor of a change that has never happened and is always yet to come. When I speak of the landscape I mean the present, the time we're living in, and that may be recognized as the hole we're in. I feel that speaking about the place where we live, the place we know and recognize has become increasingly important. In that sense, I no longer care about the aspiration to become global...being international is, and has always been, a mask...curiously enough, being local is the new imposture, the new and profitable trademark of the house.

**IB:**

This return to the idea of identity is interesting, especially because in hardly 20 years—a very short period—we went from thinking about art as something global (as we did back in the 1990s) to today's vindication of local ancestral cultures... what I find clearest is that the situation is not black or white, it is not about assuming one position or the other. Instead, as you already said, we inhabit a complex and changing landscape...In the exhibition, there is a piece that references muralism and Diego Rivera. I find that opening this historic arch is very interesting since it allows us to face how the current vindication of the “local”—as you call it—emerges as a simulation of Vasconcelos' project one century later...

**JH:**

As the song Ausencia, by Héctor Lavoe, goes: twenty years are nothing...in this case...it was more or less twenty years ago when the disaster that Mexico is today was first drafted. The alleged opening of the country happened between the 1990s and the 2000s...NAFTA and the “war on drugs” opened the country's borders to all sorts of commerce, and the line between legality and illegality became more twisted, thinner, and almost invisible. Exporting Mexican art, eating Washington apples in Toluca or having someone in New York shoot heroine made in Guerrero's mountains are all related to the traps and mechanisms of the world economy. We forget that Octavio Paz was awarded the Nobel Prize in the same year as the opening of the Mexico, *Splendors of Thirty Centuries* exhibition at the New York Met and while the negotiations for NAFTA (which was signed a year later) were taking place. In what year did the boom of Mexican art that denied being Mexican start? The work *Image Industry* addresses how identity is constructed as an image, the one in the tourist postcard. A self-portrait by Diego Rivera that later became one of the pictures on the 500 peso bill...the monetary value of culture and its use-value may be the best introduction letters for the simulations of the global economy. As a matter of fact, that use and abuse of identity were already at play when El Sapo Panzón (fat-bellied toad)\* painted his murals, while he played the revolutionary in the centers of political and economic power. If we stop to think for a moment, there is nothing more contradictory than the Palacio Nacional mural paintings: claiming that they are an illustration of the history of Mexico for the people, precisely in the most symbolically inaccessible place for that people. The same thing happened when Ford commissioned him with painting Detroit Industry at the DIA: the communist artist ignored all the demonstrations and protests of the Ford workers during his stay in Chicago while he showed off his talent as a painter portraying the workers and their labor force.

\*The nickname that Dr. Atl often used to address Diego Rivera

**IB:**

This historical connection appears at two levels, politics and culture. In Galería Nacional you especially emphasize the complex relations between them. Do you believe then, that the landscape of contemporary art in Mexico is totally distorted? How do you position your practice in that context? Or, how do you handle the paradox of being inside, of being a part of it while you are also watching the mechanisms of that relation from outside?

**JH:**

No, I don't believe the landscape itself is distorted. In any case, the construction of history is the one that often generates distortions...whatever happens daily is one thing, and how those events are recorded with the intention of turning them into History is a different matter...in Mexico, we love the idea and the dream of “going down in history” as if we were entering a large VIP party...as if it was a utopia, every four years we crave for the fifth game in the World Soccer Cup. I believe that this entanglement of frustrated and masked dreams shows the series of knots and complexes we have as the good colonized country we are, especially in the bubble of art and culture...the venue is so small and there are so many who want access, that the party ends up being really boring.

I like thinking of my work as a discomfort detonator with everything it implies: moving, displeasing, antagonizing, containing, relaxing, thinking, understanding (or trying to understand), and mostly laughing at the landscape and ourselves in the landscape. In that sense, I see myself as a survivor of the catastrophe, rather than as the main character or the hero in the film. In any case, I would be an anti-hero.



That distance is a tool for shamelessly going through the landscape but with enough edge to dissect what I see, what I experience. In Galería Nacional I am interested in making an inventory of the gutter, to go over the gutter, and over again... let's be clear: it is not a chronological or methodic study... I am thrilled by dyslexic time -leaps because I believe they provide certain glimmers of meaning that would otherwise turn into bleak certainties of coherence and recipes for political correctness (exactly what art has become). I am also interested in examining power relations, I find them amusing... and there's plenty to work with over here... in Mexico, as in very few other places, the visibly invisible threads of power are woven with inflicted catholic prudishness and capital audacity. The characters change but the story remains the same and, curiously enough, we are now living a simulation of change where the script seems new but is nothing but a transfiguration of recycled self-perpetuating past ghosts and glories, *Campaña Nacional de Reforestación* (National Tree-planting Campaign) and *Playback* are symptoms, they work as panoramic pieces of evidence, inventories of the disaster, ways of recording and establishing a memory.

**IB:**

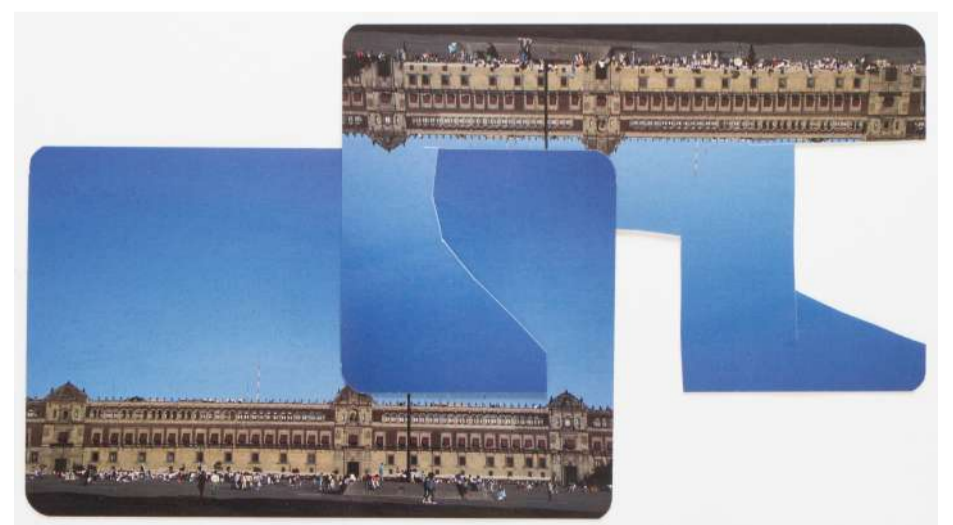
From that perspective, and precisely touching upon the subject of the national tragicomedy, I would like you to tell us about how you manage to traverse this complex landscape you just described with humor. Humor is always in your work, obviously as a satire of power, but also in your use of word and picture games, and even in many pieces that are not related to those issues (I mean that, in your case, it is always important to read the titles of the works). Precisely in these times of political correctness, where we are not allowed to make jokes about almost anything, humor appears in your work as the guiding thread and even as the foundation that supports the whole setup...

**JH:**

Humor is both a weapon and a tool, it articulates intuition and turns it into a vehicle of knowledge. For me, it is something unconscious that precisely travels from the subconscious to a reflection of the lucidity of consciousness...I believe that I would be dead and buried if I wanted to establish it as a method and as one of the strategies in my practice...it emerges, it is generated and regenerates, without the need of another argument than the one stating that it makes life more bearable by disrupting and shaking up the landscape...and of course, in that sense, it is also an instrument for survival. Perhaps that is why memes have become so popular everywhere...their sense of humor is immediate and shows an instinct for survival. I am not interested in undertaking a sociological analysis but I believe that it's been a while since a certain sense of humor and, mostly, the everyday vitality of Mexico, have been saving the country from all the governmental ineptitude and stupidity... without any idealization or exoticism, and mostly without turning it into folklore, making a living through improvisation keeps us afloat and prevents us from going to hell... and that happens outside institutions, independently from the government and the corporations that run Mexico, it even escapes the narco. The sagacity, energy, and vitality of the people keep this country going.

A close friend, Colombian author Juan Cárdenas, recently spoke of knowledge (saber) and its intrinsic and essential relation to flavor (sabor)... a phonetic game that reveals the relevance and the weight of the process, of the path, instead of the destination or the object... I feel that it is just within that Ping-Pong game of language where we may still re-invent the world. It is not by chance that Duchamp so thoroughly enjoyed and took advantage of the natural eccentricity in Raymond Roussel's *Impressions of Africa*. In the playful use of language, he found a form of knowledge of the landscape and an unsurpassable motor for his work.

I don't know if this anecdote will answer your question: last year, around this date, and after a long process where I let go of a lot of nonsense, I decided to tattoo my left arm (I am left-handed) with only two words that I like because of their simplicity and their complexity: love and humor (amor & humor). It's the only tattoo I have, so far.



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Horarios  
Martes a viernes de 11 a 17 horas  
Sábados de 11 a 15 horas