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Minneapolis' Walker Art Center opens mid-career show by Abraham Cruzvillegas of Mexico City

Updated: March 28, 2013 - 4:40 PM

REVIEW: Mexican artist Abraham Cruzvillegas fills a Walker gallery with sculptures and videos inspired by the street life of his homeland.



Mexico City-based artist Abraham Cruzvillegas takes part in his installation at the Walker Art Center.

Photo: Tom Wallace

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At first glance, the sprawling installation by Mexican artist **Abraham Cruzvillegas** at [Walker Art Center](#) suggests a haphazard construction site or maybe a neighborhood recovering from a tornado or hurricane.

Strange objects cluster at one side as if rescued from a dumpster, which perhaps they were — a log bristling with knives, a tube precariously balanced on a red ball, spiky plants atop wooden crates, fresh limes strung up to dry, pale-blue stools, a chunk of concrete sporting numbers and a crest of feathers.

A ramshackle structure occupies the room's center. Long boards bolted together sketch wall-less rooms, sleeping platforms, cupboards, perhaps a courtyard and a mazelike entrance or exit. A bundle of worn snow-fencing lies on the floor. In an adjacent "resource room," crates are pulled up to an improvised table on which books (about poetry, house building, French history) are anchored by stones, as if to keep them from blowing away. Maps of Mexico City are tacked to the wall. A peddler's jury-rigged tricycle stands nearby, its bright blue frame tricked out with mirrors and a sound system.

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Mexican artist Abraham Cruzvillegas concocted this theater set in collaboration with a troupe of artists and performers from Mexico City. **Tom Wallace**, Star Tribune

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In video interviews, a man and woman — the artist's parents, as it turns out — explain where residents of such ad hoc neighborhoods came from (a distant village) and how they built their homes (by hand) and raised their families (hauling dishwasher and bath water in buckets).

"It is not a house, it's a sculpture made of wood," Cruzvillegas insisted recently as the Walker's crew carefully finished installing the show. True, but like all of his work, it is a sculpture subtly imbued with ideas about art, family and society, spiked with allusions to Mexico's politics and economy.

Though well established in international art circles, especially in Europe, Cruzvillegas (pronounced crooz-vee-AY-goss) is pretty much unknown in the United States, an oversight that the Walker's mid-career retrospective is intended to correct. Following its Minneapolis premiere, which ends Sept. 22, the show will travel next year to Munich, Germany, and then return to his homeland for presentations in Mexico City and Puebla.

Cruzvillegas, 45, first gained attention at the Venice Biennale and then capitalized on his 2003 triumph there with residencies in Saché and Paris, France; Perugia, Italy; Glasgow, Scotland, and Berlin. The Walker's show samples pieces made during those residencies and includes loans from private collections.

A graduate of Mexico's National University, "of which I am quite proud," he criticized what he sees as the "failure of modernity" in his homeland. Peasants began moving to Mexico City and its environs in the mid-20th century, he said, lured by the idea that urban life would bring jobs, cars, homes, education and wealth. But that consumer paradise never materialized and the country's wealth remained concentrated in the hands of a few, he said.

Improvised out of castoff urban detritus, his work is ripe with economic and cultural allusions, especially to the sculpture of Constantin Brancusi. Most obviously the string of limes slyly echoes Brancusi's famous "Endless Column" sculpture, but the Romanian's spirit also animates Cruzvillegas' many off-kilter, stacked and geometric combinations of wood, metal and other materials.

The skeletal rooms, on the other hand, bring to mind Russian artist Ilya Kabakov's elaborate evocations of the spartan quality of life in Soviet collectives. And, of course, Marcel Duchamp's antic mix of objects and machines pervades everything.

Dubbed "The Autoconstrucción Suites" (meaning "self-construction"), the installations include a rustic theater set that Cruzvillegas produced for an ensemble of actors and musicians with whom he collaborated in Mexico City. There's another crazy pedaled vehicle, too, this one suggestive of a rickshaw complete with a tea flask.

On the gallery walls, big collages in the colors of the Mexican flag—green, white and red — strike a subliminally patriotic note. The white and red collages are made from sheets of paper dipped in paint, while the green is a grid of huge, fleshy leaves that will shrivel and die as the exhibition goes on.

A fourth wall piece, concocted during a Paris residency in 2007, is a handsome assemblage of shallow food crates and cardboard boxes that, when massed and painted black, suggest a crowded city at night. Its title, "Hausmannian Leftovers," alludes to Baron Haussmann, the controversial urban planner who engineered modern Paris by slicing wide boulevards through a medieval tangle reminiscent of the maps of today's Mexico City.

"It's about activating instability, contradiction, inefficiency," he said, gesturing toward his eccentric forms. "We can do things out of nothing. We can do things that are optimistic for the future. It's a strong creative force; you cannot deny using any possible object you have at hand. I'm not being naive and saying you can make beautiful things out of [crap] — though of course I have done that — but this is way beyond that."

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"It's a strong creative force; you cannot deny using any possible object you have at hand," Cruzvillegas said.

Abraham Cruzvillegas

When: 11 a.m.-5 p.m. Tue.-Wed. & Fri.-Sun.; 11 a.m.-9 p.m. Thu. Ends Sept. 22. Where: **Walker Art Center**, 1750 Hennepin Av. S., Mpls. Tickets: \$8-\$12; free for 17 and younger. 612-375-7600 or www.walkerart.org.

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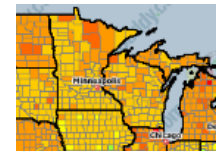
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