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Damián Ortega

States of Time

Until **23 October 2016**

The Fruitmarket Gallery was once described by an artist making an exhibition here as a kind of laboratory – a space in which artists are encouraged to experiment, to try things out, to reach out to audiences in new ways. We are privileged that Damián Ortega, one of the international art world's most interesting artists, accepted our invitation to make an exhibition, and responded with *States of Time*, an entirely new body of work made especially for – and in some cases in – The Fruitmarket Gallery.

Exhibition sponsored by



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Ortega's is a practice that finds meaning in process and in material, and the works that together make up *States of Time* are a study of what can be done with clay. Ortega has begun to work with clay relatively recently, and is better known for more industrial, urban materials and processes. Here, however, we see him experimenting with one of the most natural and organic of materials, enjoying it for what he describes as its innate generosity, its immediacy and its ability to transform itself into a variety of different states from liquid to solid.

Alongside the sculptural possibilities inherent in clay, Ortega's inspiration for the works in the exhibition has come from the natural world, and mankind's place within it. He is fascinated by how the Earth was formed, layer by layer, and by the excruciating slowness of geological time.

Eroded Valley is a study of river erosion in five stages, made by cutting into five regular stacks of bricks. The work collapses the natural and the manmade, representing the action of water on the landscape by restaging it with a power tool in the studio, with mass produced bricks (albeit beautiful mass produced bricks) standing in for the rock strata of the Earth. Elsewhere in the exhibition, Ortega looks at waves, pulling them by hand from blocks of clay and forming them by dropping rolled out sheets of clay so that they collapse, wave-like, in on themselves. His *Lava Waves*, like his *Eroded Valley*, are made from unglazed, fired clay – terracotta – the most earth-bound of materials being used to enact the activity of the most fluid.

Ortega's *Icebergs*, in contrast, are glazed, fired and painted, and are elaborate, almost decadently decorative. However they, too, are as much about process as they are about object, Ortega seeking to explore how icebergs behave rather than to reproduce how they look. Like the natural forms whose names they share, Ortega's *Icebergs* have been pounded and twisted, are full of holes and cracks.

To make them, Ortega designed a special tool with which he worked on the raw clay, hammering and piercing it. He has for a long time had a particular interest in tools, in how they extend and enhance the human body, its reach, power and dexterity. *Broken Sac* also owes its existence to a special tool: inspired by the action of a crab on a beach making a place to live by

digging small balls of sand out of a larger mass, the artist experimented with a small maquette before using the large tools displayed close to the work to hollow out the enormous mass of clay which he here shows surrounded by the remnants of its making.

In *Abrasive Objects*, Ortega presents a partial history of hand tools: early pre-Colombian objects used for pounding corn, hand and power tools used in the workshop, obsolete and up to the minute technologies. Mixed together, they encourage us to look closely at them, to marvel and to remember. All of life is there – we are what we make, how we make it, and what we make it with.

States of Time was made from January to June 2016. Three works that complete it, that complement and complicate it, were made in July 2016, as the above works were being installed. For as much as Damián Ortega is inspired by materials and the processes and tools with which it may be worked, he is also interested in space and in how an audience reacts physically to his work. *Altocumulus* is an exploded mass of clay, made in a sequence of cross sections so that it moves from two to three dimensions, from plane to volume, as you move round it. First encountered from below, it was inspired by the light in The Fruitmarket Gallery, and the particular nature of the two spaces, stacked one on top of the other. *Atmospheric Pressure* and *Tripas de Gato, Isobaric Map* were made to draw the eye up, away from the floor based pieces. *Atmospheric Pressure* is a study in compression and dispersal, hand-moulded lumps of raw clay moving together and apart along the length of vertical columns of string. *Tripas de Gato/Isobaric Map* is a mural, made in deliberate homage to the mural tradition of Mexico but according to the rules of a childhood game. Tripas de Gato is a game which involves connecting pairs of numbers one to another in an ever-proliferating maze. Ortega knew that making such a large, complex version would result in a wall drawing that looks like a map of air or ocean currents. Like *Atmospheric Pressure*, it is a kind of diagram, simply made yet with a complex affect. Ortega enjoyed the process of making it, the meditative, repetitive, physical action of tracing meandering lines across a space, like a sail boat criss-crossing the ocean.