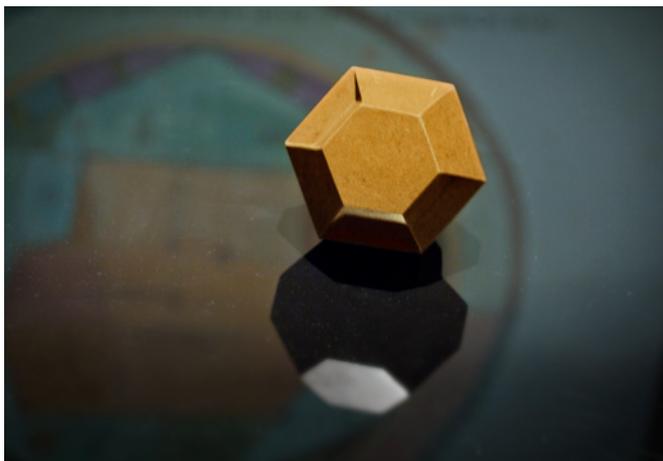


In Focus: Oscar Santillan

FOCUS

'Civilizations of the jaguar', vacuum cleaners and the human body



Zephyr (detail) 2013–14, slide projection. Courtesy: the artist and Copperfield, London

I vividly recall the first time I saw work by the Ecuadorian artist Oscar Santillan. I was being given a tour of The Ridder gallery in Maastricht by its director, Ardi Poels, when I was suddenly drawn to a slideshow. It cut, puzzlingly, from a painting by Carl Jung of his astrological birth chart, to a black and white photograph of the psychoanalyst holding a three-dimensional model of that same chart, to an exploded diagram of a vacuum cleaner, to snapshots of a shaman in the Ecuadorian jungle, to images of someone walking around the jungle with a vacuum cleaner. *Zephyr* (2013–14) tells the surreal story of how Santillan posthumously realized Jung's desire – which remained unfulfilled during the psychoanalyst's lifetime – to see 'the civilizations of the jaguar'. He did so by installing a hollow replica of Jung's three-dimensional birth chart (which he devised around 1930, but subsequently lost), modelled to function as a dirt-catching bag, inside a vacuum cleaner. Travelling to the Ecuadorian jungle, Santillan – with the help of a shaman – used this machine to suck the scent of the jaguar out of the air. In the installation of *Zephyr* at The Ridder, the 'bag' that supposedly holds the scent was placed opposite the wall on which the slides were projected. What attracted me to this work was not the singularity of the story itself so much as the surprising way it is told.

The Zephyr slideshow lasts for just one minute and ten seconds, and consists of 11 still images, separated by cuts to black, linked by brief descriptive subtitles. While the black interludes draw attention to the extent to which the images seem to follow wildly different scripts, the subtitles suggest the opposite: that they are all, in fact, part of the same story. Indeed, what for me makes the work so mesmerizing, even magical, is that the seemingly antithetical fragments of the story play out in just the way one would expect them to – a birth chart holds the key to a person’s life, a vacuum cleaner vacuums, a shaman gives guidance, jaguars emit a distinct scent in the Ecuadorian jungle, etc. – and build into a single incredible but coherent narrative. Here, everything is out of the ordinary because nothing is out of the ordinary; all becomes mysterious because mystery is conspicuously absent.

Santillan extracts elements from one context and reinserts them into another. In itself, that is nothing special: recycling has the same effect by, say, reusing the casing of a computer to make plastic cups. The plastic dies as one thing and is reincarnated as another, but it’s still plastic. It’s different with Santillan’s recontextualization of Jung, the vacuum cleaner or the shaman: the material remains what it is while simultaneously becoming something else – we see the ghosts, so to speak, of other purposes rising from it.



Lost Star, 2012–13, blank copy of Alexander von Humboldt’s *Cosmos* with extracted ink, 18 × 13 × 3 cm

Throughout his work, Santillan expresses a concern with materiality. At times, his particular focus is the human body. The video *Finale* (2012), for instance, documents a clairvoyant looking deep into the eyes of a curator to predict how he will die, followed by a short underwater glimpse of the curator seemingly enacting his own death by drowning. In *The Telepathy Manifesto* (2009–11), Santillan portrays two men, one of whom is trying to catch the tears that fall from the face of the other in his own eyes. *A Hymn* (2013) synchronizes the beat of a drum with a dancer’s sweat as it drops to the floor. The materiality of the body is also foregrounded in the performance *Juana Inés de la Cruz* (2010–11), in which five people show only their hair through holes in a wall, creating a line of disembodied locks that suddenly appear strangely alien.



A Hymn, 2013, production still. Courtesy: the artist and The Ridder, Maastricht

In other works, Santillan turns his attention to objects. For instance, in the installation *Daybreak* (2010), he scraped paint from the wall in the shape of a church window and applied it to the floor in the form of a shadow. For *Lost Star* (2013), Santillan used a chemical process to draw ink out of the pages of *Cosmos* (1845–62) – geographer, naturalist and explorer Alexander von Humboldt’s magnum opus on science and nature – which was then used to create a miniature sculpture resembling a globe. Each of these works calls to mind too many debates – political (globalization, exploitation, the politics of place), philosophical (monism, transcendence, hermeneutics) and art historical (Modernism, non-Western art) – and raises too many questions to be reduced in summary to a single trope. However, the thread of repurposing (or of creating new, parallel purposes), runs through them: tears falling from the eyes of one person into another, hair displaced from body to wall, the transmutation of miniature things into grand narratives and back. Importantly, this process of creating new purposes is never present as an answer but as a question, luring the viewer in.

Currently artist-in-residence at the Jan Van Eyck Academie in Maastricht, Santillan is developing his practice. Recently restructured, the Academie seems the perfect place to help him achieve this. Given the quality and imaginativeness of what Santillan has already created, this would appear to be less a case of the artist finding his voice than about honing it. In the six months since I first saw *Zephyr*, the work has lost none of its power. If anything, it has increased, continually percolating in my head, resonating in my interactions with other artworks, informing my writing. I can’t wait to see – and hear – what Santillan does next.

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Oscar Santillan is currently artist-in-residence at the Jan Van Eyck Academie in Maastricht, the Netherlands. Following a residency at the Delfina Foundation, London, UK, which begins in January 2015, he will have his first solo exhibition at Cøpperfield, London, in March 2015.