

Review of *Damián Ortega: States of Time* (The Fruitmarket Gallery, Edinburgh – 9<sup>th</sup> July to 23<sup>rd</sup> October 2016)

The arid heat of canyons eroded by domineering rivers. The hulking chill of icebergs floating in stasis. The multiplication of clouds in all their pendant delicacy and latent turbulence. Waves upon waves, lurching and tumbling on an unsettled sea. An elemental journey, navigated in clay. This is *States of Time*, the solo show of Mexican artist Damián Ortega, currently on display at Edinburgh's Fruitmarket Gallery.

Iteration – a concept often mathematical but here peculiarly artistic – lies at the exhibition's heart. It betrays an insistence on the exploration of possibilities, leading to the reification of a final, definitive rendering. In the case of Ortega's productions for *States in Time*, there is a strong sense in which iteration is the decisive outcome – the works thrive on plurality, on the existence of objects in multiplicity and of their relationship to time and place (or, perhaps more accurately, space).

The uniqueness of this plurality is the show's creation specifically for the Fruitmarket – and sometimes in it. The venue's large, boxy, white-walled rooms are populated by Ortega's raw, organic manipulations of clay in a way that suits the space in its contradictory sparseness. Entering the downstairs gallery, the viewer is first confronted with the warm terracotta colours of *Broken Sac*, which introduces us to this characteristic of repetition and multiplication. Dozens of rounds of clay are arranged around a much larger object (the 'sac' of the title), its depths hewn out and scattered across the floor in a sort of dynamic giving-birth. The sense of the natural material's productive fecundity is evinced here – borne out in

the title's inescapable allusion to an amniotic sac – imbuing the work with an anthropomorphic quality.

Beside *Broken Sac*, and counteracting its sprawl, is *Eroded Valleys* – five rigid rectangular masses of clay brick that chart the process of erosion by water. As the valleys carved out by the (implied) flow emerge, the lyricism to this piece comes to the fore, with our perception of space moving from negative to positive. The water theme is continued in the upstairs gallery with *Icebergs* (eight glazed, conglomerated, punctured masses that are conversely decorative in finish) and *Lava Waves*.

The latter is perhaps the most iterative of the works displayed here: a study (or, rather, series of studies) in texture and the potentialities inherent in the malleability of the medium. Arranged as it is, it seems to trace a progression from calmness (smooth folds of clay evoking nude bodies enfolded in sheets) to the tempestuous undulations of stormy seas that are similar in energy to Gustave Courbet's wave studies – working in three dimensions, however, Ortega has the edge.

*Atmospheric Pressure* and *Altocumulus* – one couched in a recessed room downstairs and the other suspended over the staircase to the upper gallery – are surprising in their marriage of hard, earthy clay with the insubstantiality of clouds. Small lumps of clay are suspended on strings in a manner that suggests the stars strung out across the heavens, the downward trajectory of rain, or the strata of different cumuli. There is always something

plural about the way we read these works and about the ways they change as we walk amongst, under, and around them.

If there is one element of misfire in this show, it is *Abrasive Objects*, which interrupts the focus on the elemental to bring us back to the human and the synthetic, recreating 144 tools from across the ages of man (flint arrowheads to electric sanders) in unfired clay. It is deftly done – the level of detail is impressive and the naïveté of the clay by turns suits or jars with the objects depicted. But it sits uncomfortably within the context of the natural persuasions of the other works, where the concentration is on the idea of innate capacity rather than external intervention.

The success of the exhibition as a whole can in large part be attributed to the rawness and organic quality of Ortega's chosen medium, clay. A contemporary sculptural response to the dialogue of mastery between humankind and nature, *States of Time* recalls but also modernises the Romantic sublime, distilling it in these iterative ruminations on the temporal alteration of spaces and forms by natural, physical forces.

NB: all works dated 2016.

© Naomi Stewart, 2016