Reviews

By Jens Hoffman (January 2016)
Adrián Villar Rojas
MARIAN GOODMAN GALLERY

The Argentinean artist Adrián Villar Rojas offers his audience a mashup of the adolescent iconographies that have fascinated him since he was a teenager: that of sci-fi, with its robots and spaceships; that of the postapocalyptic, derived from graphic novels and video games; and that of the prehistoric, with its dinosaurs and primitive tools. "Two Suns," his first solo exhibition at Marian Goodman Gallery in New York, might be understood as an endpoint of his long-term exploration of these surreal pre- and post-human universes.

To explain, it is necessary to return to Villar Rojas's 2008 solo exhibition "Lo que el fuego me trajo" (What Fire Has Brought Me), at Ruth Benzacar Galería de Arte in Buenos Aires. For that show, the artist turned the basement of the gallery into an archaeological dig filled with thousands of broken clay tiles and numerous sculptures of anthropomorphic creatures. In the midst of the debris and fictional artifacts, visitors encountered a human-scale version of Michelangelo's David. After a number of solo and group shows in North and South America and Europe, Villar Rojas's breakthrough came in 2011, with his solo presentation for the Argentinean pavilion at the Fifty-Fourth Venice Biennale; there, the artist created a giant, futuristic forest. Then, at Documenta 13 in 2012, he presented an even more ambitious piece, Return the World, consisting of dozens of sculptures placed outdoors, on the slope of a hill and under a bridge of a highway.

Villar Rojas's show at Marian Goodman Gallery comes after many years on the road with his team of assistants, and left rather more delicate and subtle compared with his past efforts. The entire gallery was dark, and our eyes had to adjust when we entered from the bright elevator. The floor was covered with cast-concrete tiles of various colors (mostly gray and brown), which contained within them a diverse range of discarded objects such as coins, pieces of plastic bags, and even an old iPod. It seemed as if the artist had whisked us away to a time hundreds of millions of years in the future, when cast-offs we tossed out without a thought have turned into fossils, and a new civilization builds its foundations with this petrified trash. But rather than conveying a sense of rebirth, the show evoked a grim mood: The room was like an abandoned theater stage with the curtain closed after the performance, or a dance hall after the music has stopped and the revelers have gone home. Sentimentality, often faintly perceptible in Villar Rojas's work, was pervasive in this installation.

But the show's main attraction was still to come. As we walked down the corridor leading to the south gallery, a long leg came into view. It turned out to belong to Michelangelo's David—not the David from Florence, but a prize David, lying on his side with his eyes closed. It was unclear if he had lost his fight with Goliath, or if he was recovering from battle—like Villar Rojas, he seemed to want a break from being a hero. This seemed to suggest that the next exhibition will introduce us to a brand-new aspect of Villar Rojas's work, one in which the artist will "excavate" the clay monuments he has produced over the past seven or so years, performing an archaeology of sorts, of his own history.

—Jena Hoffmann

Martine Syms
BRIDGET DONAHUE

Martine Syms has lectured in venues as varied as the Walker Art Center in Minneapolis, South by Southwest Interactive in Austin, and, this past September, in a field on the outskirts of Storm King Art Center in New Windsor, New York. There, seated at a table with a makeshift AV setup, she played a recording of James Taylor's 1968 ballad "Something in the Way She Moves." The wistful vocals momentarily heightened the easy romance of a countryside evening, but then Syms began speaking of how she grew up studying her aunt—in effect transposing Taylor's admiration of a nameless lover onto a black teenager's observation of a role model. The song became a meditation on gesture, on the ineffable "something" that invests a body in motion with allure, authority, or authenticity. A little over a week later, Syms opened her solo exhibition "Vertical Elevated Oblique." The title piphers from the terminology of an early attempt to record and capture gesture, John Bulwer's Chirologia: Or the Natural Language of the Hand (1644), describing a (decidedly Anglo-Saxon, decidedly male) public speaker standing with his hand cocked upward (Vertical) and his arm raised in line with his shoulders (Elevated) while angled forward forty-five degrees (Oblique).

For the exhibition's centerpiece, the ten-minute, thirty-three-second video Notes on Gesture, 2015, Syms used Chirologia's elaborate notation system as a rough guide for directing the performance of her collaborator Diamond Stingily. (Stingily's fold-out poster Lose, Diamond, 2013, appeared among the items on sale in the gallery's back-room pop-up store for Syms's imprint, Dominica.) Before a purple backdrop, Stingily executed a range of actions for the camera, each edited down into quick cuts and looped several times. The repetitions turned audio snippets of ambient music and Stingily's uttered phrases—"Real talk," "Check yourself," "Point blank, period"—into a lurching, percussive sound track. Stingily bobbed her head, rolled her eyes, hunched her shoulders. Often only her hands appeared on-screen: pointing, admonishing, beckoning, clapping.

Notes on Gesture is only the latest indicator of a widespread concern with the "natural language of the hand," one also evident in the hand sculptures of Josh Kline and Aleksandra Domanović in hands sifting through archival material in videos by Camille Henrot and Ellie Gaj in the collaborative investigation of touch-screen wipes by Alexandra Lerman and choreographer Madeline Holland; and in the parsing of hand signals in politics and finance by, respectively, Liz Magic Laser and Ben Thorp Brown. A perennial metonym for labor, the hand is now the hinge between the precariat and its devices. Much of this work, like the media theory that informs it, reduces human subjects to producers or consumers, often at the expense of considering gesture's broader cultural dimensions. Chirologia, for instance, betrays an anxious chauvinism when Bulwer exhorts English rhetoricians to match the voluble body language of their neighbors on the Continent. Notes on Gesture delib-