

# ARTFORUM

## *Utopias are for Birds*

*On the art of Álvaro Urbano*

By Javier Montes (January 1, 2026)



Álvaro Urbano, *Granada Granada (Magnolia, Granado)*, 2023, metal, paint, 13 elements. Installation view, Travesía Cuatro, Mexico City.  
Photo: Ramiro Chaves.

I FIRST MET ÁLVARO URBANO at the semi-secret home of legendary architect Carlo Mollino (1905–1973), which we had coincidentally chosen to visit on the same day. The apartment, in a bourgeois corner of Turin, has an atmosphere of suspended time. Inside, a trove of occult objects attests to its erstwhile owner’s conception of the space as a funerary mansion for his soul in the afterlife. Mollino—a heterodox figure who, from the margins, influenced the trajectory of twentieth-century design—likely never spent a single night there; its existence was only discovered after his death.

Born in Madrid and based in Berlin and Paris, Urbano constructs what he calls “habitable dioramas”: walk-in installations that invest twentieth-century architecture, both the iconic and the ruined, with a symbolic charge. Urbano trained as an architect, and the environments he creates are all-encompassing evocations of transition and intermediacy. Like Mollino, he orchestrates scenographic elements down to the last cigarette butt, meticulously fabricated and tossed onto the floor with deceptive nonchalance. He finds inspiration in the oneiric auras of the past and in the echoes of the voices and stories of those who built and inhabited these places. In Urbano’s work, moods and half-glimpsed dimensions arise

more through indirect suggestion than through overt referentiality. Rooted in historical research but adding a generative element of fiction, they invite viewers to imagine what happened here—or didn't.



Álvaro Urbano, *Skin and Bones*, 2014, performance, polystyrene, glue, cardboard. Performance view, Neue Nationalgalerie, Berlin, November 1, 2014.  
Photo: Álvaro Urbano.

How does architecture speak? Urbano posed this question in *Skin and Bones*, 2014, an early action at Mies van der Rohe's Neue Nationalgalerie in Berlin. With an earnestness not lacking in humor, Urbano recruited performers to don costumes that mimicked the iconic elements of Mies's monolithic structure: stainless-steel columns, walls of polished marble. By turns greeting visitors and barring their entry to the museum, the performers animated the building while desacralizing the quasi-religious majesty and vaulted proportions of Mies's design. Since then, Urbano has continued to subvert the totalizing—often authoritarian and patriarchal—mythology of the modern movement.

In 2021, for example, he turned his critical gaze toward that other father figure of twentieth-century modernism, Le Corbusier. "*L'invitation au voyage*," at Travesía Cuatro in Madrid, took as its subject the villa E-1027 at Roquebrune-Cap-Martin, France. Its legend is well known: Eileen Gray carefully oversaw every inch of the villa's planning and construction, starting out from Le Corbusierian principles such as the *pilotis* (concrete columns) and the *machine-à-habiter* (the house as a machine for living) but recasting them through her organic, almost spiritual vision of domestic space. Later, after Gray had relinquished possession of the home, Le Corbusier came for a visit and defaced the original, painting bright murals that disfigured its design, posing naked for photographs while he did so. Gray never got over this particularly aggressive instance of manspreading.

In Madrid, Urbano transformed the gallery into an immersive replica of the villa that evoked different aspects of this *agon* between patriarch and female dissident. Using painted cardboard, he meticulously

reproduced Gray’s original furnishings and fixtures at scale—with a few alterations. Withered plants and flowers, rendered in metal (one of his favored materials), seemed to grow from the walls; Le Corbusier’s small-scale cabin *Cabanon* (1951), made a cameo in the form of a doghouse. Canvases by Norwegian painter Tyra Tingleff incorporated reproductions of the infamous photos of a nude Le Corbusier, brush in hand. Everything was bathed in a crepuscular, dreamlike Mediterranean light. A soundtrack layered sea-surf sounds with musical phrases from Henri Duparc’s 1870 vocal setting of Charles Baudelaire’s poem “*L’invitation au voyage*” (from his *Les fleurs du mal*, 1857)—the phrase that is written on the painting that presides over the villa’s living room. A trapdoor allowed visitors to peek behind the scenes and see the props that made possible the phantasmagoria. The installation’s theatrical nature summoned the eerie backstage dramaturgy of Marcel Duchamp’s *Étant donnés*, 1946–66, at the Philadelphia Museum of Art. Similarly, Urbano’s gigantic tableau vivant calls up an indeterminate realm that contains both truth and fiction—in this case, not only to materialize allegorical motifs but also to comment on changing notions of masculinity, gender, and the patriarchal inheritance of art and architecture.



View of “Álvaro Urbano: *L’invitation au voyage*,” 2021, Travesía Cuatro, Madrid. From left: *L’invitation au voyage* (Window), 2021; *Elena*, 2021; *L’invitation au voyage* (E-1027 Table), 2021. Photo: Pablo Gómez-Ogando.

By contrast, Urbano mobilizes parallel and alternative histories embodied in forgotten or unfinished buildings, sculptures, artworks, and artists who have been omitted from the tomes of the official canon. In “Ever Since Night Falls,” his project for gallery ChèrtLudde’s stand at Art Basel Statements in 2019, Urbano re-created twenty-nine sculptures by other artists that have disappeared or been stolen or destroyed throughout history. These included fabrications of Richard Serra’s *Tilted Arc*, 1981, and On Kawara’s lost briefcase, stolen during a 1979 trip. Each day, a freestanding, dark-blue curtain moved closer and closer to the gallery booth, until it finally blocked access completely.

This set of interests culminated in Urbano’s imposing tour de force, “TABLEAU VIVANT” (2024–25), at New York’s SculptureCenter. Here, Urbano called attention to the legacy of sculptor, performance artist, and writer Scott Burton (1939–1989). Burton died of an HIV-related illness in 1989; since then, roughly half of his site-specific projects have been removed or altered. Burton’s *Atrium Furnishment*, 1986, was originally installed in the lobby of the Equitable Center building in Midtown Manhattan but was dismantled in 2020 during a renovation. Urbano recovered fragments of the original arena and presented them under a ceiling, lit from above and covered with dead leaves and other plant detritus.

The installation, a duet between light and marble, operated on an uncanny plane that encompassed the elegiac history of Burton's curved seating arrangement while recovering a sense of interior intimacy.



Álvaro Urbano, *Le cabanon*, 2021, wood, wood stain. Installation view, Travesía Cuatro, Madrid. Photo: Pablo Gómez-Ogando.

“Urbano’s work speaks to the need for each generation to reinvent the past and reimagine its ideals. Only in this way can the past be brought from the abstract world to the concrete one we touch and tread every day.”



View of “Álvaro Urbano: *Acto I: La eterna adolescencia* (Act I: The Eternal Adolescence), 2023–24, Tenerife Espacio de las Artes, Santa Cruz de Tenerife, Canary Islands, Spain. Photo: M. Laura Benavente.

For an earlier project, “*El despertar*” (The Awakening), 2020, at the cultural center La Casa Encendida in Madrid, he focused on José Antonio Corrales and Ramón Vázquez Molezún’s Hexagon Pavilion. The building was conceived for the Spanish pavilion at the 1958 World’s Fair in Brussels, and is considered an important, if neglected, example of Spanish modernism. Dismantled and re-erected the following year at



the Casa de Campo de Madrid, it was left abandoned there for decades and is now a ruin. Urbano reproduced some of its sleek pillars and roof modules on painted cardboard and faithfully mimicked the hedges and scrub surrounding the pavilion's remains using metal sculptures. A sickly, artificial twilight tinted the scene in mustard tones. The work's decadence reminds us that the modern image of the country Franco sought to project outwardly bore no relation to the fascist and conservative dictatorship that his regime imposed internally. But the dense, foggy atmosphere was mysterious and almost somber, inviting open-ended contemplation more than emphasizing the perception of a concrete site or time.

That indefinite light—perhaps morning, perhaps sundown—reappeared at the Tenerife Espacio de las Artes (Tenerife Arts Space, or TEA) with “Álvaro Urbano: *Acto I: La eterna adolescencia*” (Act I: The Eternal Adolescence) in 2023. That project examined the Hotel Gazmira, designed by the elusive and influential Canarian architect Rubens Henríquez and partially constructed, though never completed, on the Canary Island of La Palma. The hotel was underwritten by the local banana-growing elite as well as by Canarian emigrants who had made their fortunes in the Americas. The fleeting economic miracle in Venezuela, once the preferred destination for those departing La Palma, excited the imaginations of those who had seen or lived in the concrete modernist utopias of the tropics. The complex was intended to help the economy of La Palma, but failed. Like the fictional Fitzcarraldo's never-finished opera house in Iquitos, it was supposed to be a place where the new upper classes could shine in accordance with their station. At the TEA, Urbano used walls of mirrors to reconstruct its hexagonal form, surrounding it with sculptures shaped like banana leaves and other plant species, some native, some introduced to the Canary Islands.



Petrit Halilaj and Álvaro Urbano, *For the Birds*, 2015, galvanized chicken wire, two canaries, plants, mixed media. Installation view, Bundeskunsthalle, Bonn.  
Photo: Álvaro Urbano.

Writing in the show's catalogue, curator and critic Magalí Arriola cites Urbano's interest in theorist Michel Foucault's concept of heterotopia. The idea refers to non-normative spaces in which a juxtaposition of scenes and stories allows the joining-together of divergent temporalities and locations in a way that defies patriarchal and authoritarian regulations of social and political *topoi*. Heterotopia seems an apt description for the way Urbano has established fictional connections among physically or temporally distant places. This was evident in an early work, *For the Birds*, 2015, which he first conceived alongside the Kosovar artist Petrit Halilaj after the two shared an artistic residency at Villa Romana in Florence in 2013 (Halilaj and Urbano are married, and have since collaborated frequently). The piece was inspired by the artists' encounter with two canaries that flew freely around their shared working and living spaces in Berlin. In Florence, the idea evolved into a structure that would allow birds to fly across the outdoor zone that separated studio and dwelling. With the help of friends, they installed a floating tunnel made of chicken wire on the Villa Romana grounds; it connected one part of the building with another, enabling birds to travel back and forth across a large garden.



View of "Álvaro Urbano: Prelude," 2025, Marian Goodman, New York. From left: *Prelude (Dogwood)*, 2025; *He would always leave a window open, even at night*, 2025; *Zu verschenken (To Give Away)*, 2025. Photo: Alex Yudzon.

This avian tunnel stands for the immaterial and intuitive connectivity that has persisted in Urbano's work ever since. In June 2025, the installation *September and the Lions* at ChertLüdde in Berlin conjured the environment surrounding the Löwenbrücke, or Lions' Bridge, in the Tiergarten. Handmade metal sculptures reproduced the park's plants in all their wilting, late-summer glory. Since the postwar era at the latest, this area has been a cruising ground: a semipublic space for anonymous sexual encounters, heterotopian in the Foucauldian sense. The following month, "Prelude," Urbano's show at Marian Goodman Gallery, opened in New York and formed a perfect complement to the Berlin show. The exhibition's vegetal mise-en-scène referred to the Ramble, a wooded landscape within Central Park that functions similarly to the Tiergarten. Two streetlamps engaged in a mute but luminous dialogue, an

indecipherable Morse code, alluding to the silent exchanges and secret ciphers of strangers who meet there for their trysts. The lamps also accentuated the covert connection with the Berlin exhibition, because the Löwenbrücke is very close to the Gaslaternen-Freilichtmuseum, an open-air display of streetlamps in the Tiergarten. This stretch of the park, an object of fascination for Urbano, contains an array of a hundred or so different models of public gaslights, now obsolete and semi-derelict. In this way, Berlin and New York were linked as though through an imaginary tunnel that gave passage to the hidden or half-glimpsed sexualities that heteropatriarchy silences and obscures.

To heterotopia we might add the parallel notion of *uchronia*: The Greek term is used to convey the existence or possibility of alternative temporalities that allow us to project historical facts onto other imaginaries and narratives: the “what if? . . .” scenarios that have always interested Urbano. “GRANADA GRANADA,” his two-part exhibition held across Travesía Cuatro’s venues in Guadalajara, Mexico, and Mexico City in 2023, staged a fictional 1920s meeting between Spanish poet Federico García Lorca and Mexican architect Luis Barragán in Granada, Spain. García Lorca and Barragán likely never met in real life, yet Urbano’s speculative artwork invites the following thought experiment: What if the persecuted poet, murdered during the Spanish Civil War, encountered the famously austere and mysterious Barragán? Or, returning to the Hotel Gazmira in La Palma: What if its concrete lattice were not just the residue of a finished project but the embryo of an unconcluded one, both ruin and seed? Urbano’s work evokes a complex past that hasn’t yet occurred and a future that already has—a present that has *always already* been, to employ the idea of non-dialectical temporality favored by philosopher Maurice Blanchot.



View of “Álvaro Urbano: TABLEAU VIVANT,” 2024–25, SculptureCenter, New York. Photo: Charles Benton.

Perhaps within the speculative intersection of heterotopia and *uchronia* lies the realm of utopia—which may be the core of Urbano’s practice. Urbano’s installations, radically utopian in this sense, re-create ideal spaces free from the spatiotemporal coordinates and rigid laws that govern our daily lives. These “free” places accommodate other narratives, from the creation of habitats for experimenting with desire and libido to speculation on the giant “what if?” that represents for us, its heirs, the frustration of the utopian (or were they dystopian?) ideals of modernity. Urbano’s work speaks to the need for each generation to reinvent the past and reimagine its ideals. Only in this way can the past be brought from the abstract world to the concrete one we touch and tread every day.

The germ of this idea lies in one of his earliest efforts, the series “Utopias Are for Birds,” 2012–18, for which he reproduced, in miniature, utopian projects from radical architectural offices such as Superstudio and Archigram, transforming them into birdhouses scattered outside around ChertLüdde. The birds were inadvertent participants, occupying these sculptures the same way as those who enter his “habitable dioramas,” or visitors to the rooms of Carlo Mollino’s home meant for the afterlife. Bird and visitors are, for Urbano, ideal metaphors for the citizens of Utopia, a place beyond reach yet accessible through the uchronic resources of poetry and symbol.