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Does Adrián Villar Rojas's Work Hold the Key to Communicating With Nonhuman Entities?

The Argentine-born artist speaks with curator Claude Adjil about his ambitious new show at the Aspen Art Museum.

By Julia Halperin (July 6, 2026)



Adrián Villar Rojas, *Terrestrial Poems*, 2025, at Aichi Triennale in Seto.

Photography by Kido Tamotsu, © Aichi Triennale organizing committee, and courtesy of the artist, Ruth Benzacar Galería de Arte, and Kurimanzutto

Adrián Villar Rojas is a kind of magician. The Argentine-born artist's large-scale, site-specific installations often appear to collapse space and time. For his most recent trick, he has unveiled one of his most ambitious transformations yet, an environmental installation at the Aspen Art Museum. The overhaul is part of an expansive exhibition, "First Gods, Lost Animals," that fills two floors of the museum through next April.

The project extends the now-46-year-old artist's long-held interest in exploring how information, traditions, and species evolve and reckon with the prospect of erasure or extinction. Alongside the exhibition's environment, which includes a series of cave materializations derived from prehistoric sites, Villar Rojas has presented a new life-size sculpture of a Triceratops skull, co-commissioned by the Aspen Art Museum and Audemars Piguet Contemporary. The work expresses a provocative proposition: What if art were not an invention of Homo sapiens but, in fact, a gift from Neanderthals?

Ahead of the exhibition, Villar Rojas sat down with Claude Adjil, curator-at-large of the Aspen Art Museum and the Serpentine in London, to discuss the ideas that underpin his increasingly ambitious work—and the village it takes to make it a reality.

Claude Adjil: A central theme of the exhibition “First Gods, Lost Animals” is how humans create systems—mythology, art, mathematics, and now, A.I.—to make an incomprehensible universe legible. What do you think prehistory reveals about the instability of what we call human?

Adrián Villar Rojas: The instability begins with prehistory itself, an epistemological tool we created to understand ourselves. But this tool is not neutral; it is historically produced, socially situated, and shaped by political and economic conditions. As those conditions change, so does the tool’s perspective, along with our understanding of what counts as human. Paradoxically, constructing a prehistory reveals that the human is not a fixed condition but a negotiable one.

Adjil: A new body of work has emerged in this exhibition that takes the form of a cave that appears as a geological archive, psychological projection, technological prototype, ritual theater, and a precursor to digital and A.I.-generated image spaces. How did the cave emerge as the central protagonist for the project, and did you think of it more as a physical environment, a philosophical condition, or a model for human consciousness itself?

Villar Rojas: What interests me about caves is that they may be among the first technological spaces where meaning emerges. Unlike a waterfall, a rainbow, or a volcano, which remain external phenomena, a cave is a world within the world: a place we can enter, inhabit, modify, and thus artificialize. I am interested in the possibility that meaning emerges through successive separations. An organism first becomes aware of itself as distinct from its surroundings. It then enters a space already separated from the world. The cave creates an interior within the exterior, a second reality within reality. Before paintings, representation, or fully formed symbolic systems, the cave becomes the condition in which a self discovers it can deposit an aspect of its interiority.

“What interests me about caves is that they may be among the first technological spaces where meaning emerges.” —Adrián Villar Rojas

Adjil: Your installations suggest that artifacts are never neutral remnants of history, but projections shaped by mythology, institutions, and contemporary desire. Do you see archaeology itself as a form of fiction-making?

Villar Rojas: What interests me is not whether archaeology is a form of fiction-making, but how objects become disconnected from the networks that produced them. Museums often decontextualize things, severing them from the environments, relations, materials, and histories that give them meaning. The result is an orphaned object, increasingly available for projection and manipulation. What I hope my work does is move in the opposite direction, creating ecological exhibition systems in which meaning is produced through relationships rather than isolated objects: less artifact, more ecology.

Adjil: Throughout your career, your installations have straddled the liminal space between artifact, sculpture, fossil, and found object. We've often discussed Elena Filipovic's brilliant book *The Apparently Marginal Activities of Marcel Duchamp*. Can you tell us how this book and Duchamp have influenced your understanding of the readymade versus artifact?

Villar Rojas: I may not answer your question directly, but what I took from Filipovic's book was the recognition of the artist as an administrator and a curator. The artist does not simply produce artworks; they organize the conditions under which a project can exist, negotiating with institutions, shaping presentations, writing texts, managing circulation, conservation, and display. I already knew this because it has been part of my daily practice for years. The book gave the language to articulate a dimension of artistic work that remains profoundly underrepresented and underrecognized, despite being essential to how artworks come into the world.



Adrián Villar Rojas, *El fin de la imaginación*, 2022, at the Bass in Miami. Photography by Zaire Aranguren, courtesy of the artist and the Bass.

Adjil: In your work, material environments possess agency rather than functioning as passive settings. What do you think about the relationship between materiality and intelligence?

Villar Rojas: What interests me is the possibility that environments can organize intelligence. The cave does not think, but it creates the conditions under which thought becomes possible. In that sense, it is less an intelligent object than a condition for intelligence.

Adjil: The exhibition repeatedly returns to scale—geological, biological, technological: the scale of the triceratops versus the scale of *Return the World XIX*, for example. Does thinking through planetary or deep time alter how you understand artistic production itself?

Villar Rojas: Thinking at those scales fundamentally alters how I understand artistic production. Art stops appearing as a universal category and begins to look like a very local phenomenon, a recent and fragile behavior produced by a particular species under very specific conditions.

Adjil: *Untitled (From the Series The Language of the Enemy)* places the Venus of Lespugue within the body of a dinosaur fossil; the sculpture creates a temporal impossibility that collapses evolutionary, mythological, and artistic histories into one object. What does that temporal confusion allow you to think through?

Villar Rojas: The triceratops condenses a long chain of transformations. A living creature becomes a fossil, geology, archaeology, scan, digital model, computable geometry, fabrication, and finally sculpture. But the work introduces another layer: a Venus figure carved into one of its horns, as if Neanderthals and Homo sapiens had collaboratively transformed the fossil into a symbolic object. What interests me is how a single sculpture can contain an arc that runs from the earliest forms of representation to contemporary computational systems, creating an immense historical loop and effectively staging the evolutionary history of representation itself.

Adjil: There's a striking tension between the tactile physicality of bronze and the invisible computational systems involved in shaping it. Were you interested in collapsing distinctions between hand, machine, fossil, and code?

Villar Rojas: The bronze, the fossil, the hand tool, the algorithm, the cave painting, the mathematical equation, the god, and the museum are all technologies produced by a finite intelligence attempting to negotiate reality. Every technology speaks about a certain incompleteness in the human project; they are extensions of a finite intelligence trying to understand, inhabit, and survive within a structured universe.

Adjil: The exhibition feels simultaneously sacred, archaeological, and speculative. Are you interested in creating works that function less as sculptures and more as cosmological propositions?

Villar Rojas: The cosmological feeling is not the goal. It is the consequence of constructing a sufficiently dense reality and calling it an exhibition.

Adjil: Your work frequently destabilizes authorship: fossils are formed by geological processes, artifacts by collective cultures, and your sculptures through collaborations between digital systems, your incredible office and studio team, and material behavior. It feels important to acknowledge how your work challenges this idea of singular artistic creation. Perhaps it's interesting to discuss how this exhibition came together and the incredibly talented team that has brought it to life.

Villar Rojas: In theoretical physics and astrobiology, a von Neumann probe is a self-replicating machine sent into the universe. It lands in an unfamiliar environment, absorbs local materials and conditions, reconstructs itself according to what it finds, and produces a divergent offspring. I sometimes think about my practice in similar terms. Each project absorbs the specific conditions of a place, its people, materials, histories, and ecologies, becoming a new iteration within a larger system of world-building. Many of the people involved have worked together for more than a decade, so each new world also carries the accumulated memory of previous ones.

Adjil: I'm curious if you think about how future nonhuman intelligences will encounter your work and what they might perceive or misunderstand.

Villar Rojas: I have dedicated much of the last 25 years of my life to constructing positions from which humanity can be observed from the outside. I hope the work itself already constitutes a possible answer to that question.



Adrián Villar Rojas, *Ahora estaré con mi hijo, el asesino de tu herencia (Now I Will Be With My Son, The Murderer of Your Heritage)*, 2011, at the Argentine Pavilion of the 54th Venice Biennale. Photography by Oliver C. Haas, courtesy of the artist and Ruth Benzacar Galería de Arte.