

ARTFORUM

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OPENINGS: MATEO LÓPEZ



Mateo López, *Manzana (Apple)* (detail), 2011, wood, paper, ink, apple seeds and stem, 26 3/4 x 13 x 12 1/4".

“**THERE ARE OPTICAL ILLUSIONS** in time as well as space.” For his 2011 exhibition “*Maio*” (May) at Galeria Luisa Strina in São Paulo, Mateo López neatly lifted Marcel Proust’s famous words, writing them out in graphite on a crisp white sheet of paper that he

taped to the wall at the beginning of the exhibition. The epigraph served both to unmoor the artist's objects from a finite location and to demarcate the gallery as a zone for temporal trompe l'oeil. For López, the image, whether drawn or constructed, reaches outside itself, achieving an atmospheric effect that alters time and space. His subjects are not restricted to the two-dimensional plane: Although born from it, they move through it, over it, and beyond it.

Take *Manzana*, 2011, his sculptural rendering of an apple (a recurring motif). Eight slices of paper suggest the spherical shape of the fruit, while also conjuring the form of its pared sections. The materiality of paper itself evokes the soft texture of pulp; the thin red line drawn around the paper's edge to define it in space heightens this optical play. The addition of an apple's actual stem and seeds establishes a tension between the quasi verisimilitude López achieves and the real, physical object. For *Puerta*, 2011, another work in "Maio," López built a white wooden frame with a white paper door, propping it ajar against the gallery wall. This sculpture acted as a frame of reference for the visitor, hinting that the works in the exhibition were as much portals in time to pass through as they were objects in space to walk around.

In López's domain, drawing and its paper support constitute a medium that enables travel, both literal and figurative, through many dimensions, involving historical, fictional, and personal narratives as much as the performative and sculptural narrative of the malleable, flat, fibrous material. The studio itself becomes transient: On multiple occasions, the artist has embarked on drafting expeditions, channeling the twentieth-century nomadism of Che and Bolaño or of European modernists such as Duchamp and Alighiero Boetti. Ever since his first solo exhibition at Galeria Casas Riegner in 2006 in Bogotá, Colombia, López has been known to turn spaces into makeshift workshops. (In his 2010 installation for the Twenty-Ninth São Paulo Bienal, *Palacio de Papel* [Paper Palace], the artist nested a studio inside a split polyhedron, fashioning almost everything within, from pencil sharpeners and tubes of paint to paper clips, out of paper.)

In his ongoing project *Viaje sin movimiento* (Traveling Without Movement), begun in 2008, López retraces the defunct railroads of Colombia (declared a national architectural heritage site in 1986) in order to record the oral histories of the people who once worked on

them and who still live along the tracks. Constructed beginning in the mid-nineteenth century, the railroads could be considered Colombia's *Fitzcarraldo*, devoured by time and the jungle. After more than half of the national project was completed, it was abandoned as a result of bankruptcy, corruption, and the engineering challenge of laying down track on the steep terrain of the Andean Corridor. López documented his first three of five planned trips along the rails with drawings, maquettes, found objects, sculptures, and a video, installing these materials in and around a studio he built inside a freestanding wooden staircase.

López first saw many of the abandoned train stations by motorbike in 2007, again packing his studio in his suitcase for a journey through numerous Colombian cities as part of *Diario de Motocicleta*, a satiric reflection on the *Motorcycle Diaries* of Che. The drawings López made on the road are collected in a brochure, a kind of foldout map of his travels. In contrast to the revolutionary figure his project cites, López assumed the position of an antihero, thoughtfully recording his journey in notebooks and turning the experience into installations at art spaces in Bogotá, Medellín, and Cali.



Mateo López, *Archivo (Archive)*, 2012, cardboard, carpet, aluminum lamps. Installation view, Galeria Casas Riegner, Bogotá, Colombia, 2012.

THE JOURNEYS IN LÓPEZ'S DRAWINGS trace back to the beginning of his practice. Born and raised in Bogotá, López studied architecture for a year at Pontificia Universidad Javeriana before attending the Universidad de los Andes. There he took classes with the influential artist and critic Lucas Ospina, whose innovative drawing exercises challenged López, as an extension of his architectural training, to think beyond a rectilinear, flat plane.

Since then, López's engaged correspondence with artists has been a salient aspect of his work, in which drawing assumes the form of a conversation. In 2007, he initiated an exchange with the Medellín-based artist José Antonio Suárez Londoño, another pivotal figure for a generation of younger artists in Colombia. Londoño begins each day by reading, then making a related drawing in a notebook. (A selection of these books can be seen in his first survey in the US, at the Drawing Center, New York, which opens this month.) López and Londoño's visual dialogue also occurred in a series of notebooks, mailed back and forth, and slowly filled over several years as they each added

compositions, eventually producing the artists' book *Dibujos* (Drawings), 2007–2009. Their ongoing collaboration also led to *Ping Pong*, 2010, a collection of sixty-two drawings they worked on separately based on thirty-one heterogeneous word prompts, including *tree, architecture, song, corners, geometry, and landscape*.

This past February, López began another dialogue, with William Kentridge. Much of their discussion has centered on how to incorporate narrative into drawing and how to include the viewer directly in a story. This exchange permeates the young artist's largest and most elaborate exhibition yet, which opened in August at Galeria Casas Riegner. López takes the labyrinthine and spatial flow already explored in exhibitions such as "Maio" even further in this work, which stems from his memory of the room where he was born. Not unlike Borges's famous garden of forking paths, in which time itself collapses and disperses, *Avenida Primavera, Casa No. 2* (Spring Avenue, House No. 2), 2012, is a fictional book one literally walks into; it also alludes to a house in Bogotá, whose illusory address serves as the exhibition's title. Twelve installations double as the book's twelve chapters, taking over four main galleries at Casas Riegner and even extending into the office and outside. On entering the gallery-cum-book-cum-imaginary-house, one receives a small, simply bound hundred-page book that serves as the exhibition guide—the book within the book—where, again, the Proust quote appears as an epigraph. In an introductory drawing in the first gallery, *Nota de Autor* (Author's Note), 2012, López primly writes out the numbers of each book page in alphabetical rather than numerical order—a reshuffling that gives the viewer permission to roam freely throughout the pages as linear time falls away.

Chapter 2, *Archivo* (Archive), 2012, unfolds in a room crowded with empty shelves that uncannily resemble the green metal storage units commonly found in Colombian bureaucratic offices, though López made his from cardboard. The palpable emptiness of the shelves conjures an imperiled state of memory, connected to the proliferation of technological devices that replace the human mind's capacity to recollect. But the physical experience of being inside a book is heightened through a sensory encounter: Walking into this room, one smells paper. The odor emanates not from the shelves' material, but from a special fragrance López made, based on the scent of old books and magazines. Paper emerges yet again in his practice as his Proustian madeleine, summoning our evanescent past through its own obsolescence. López's oeuvre introduces a new paradigm for such

memory travels. Complicating the ubiquitous archival impulse in art production, his work relies on a kind of architectural framing that, like a Möbius strip, loops back on time as much as space.

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