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A Colossus in Clay Speaks a Generation's Message

By RANDY KENNEDY

The fourth floor of the New Museum was in ruins. It was almost impossible to walk without stepping on a piece of wood or a pile of rubble, and a fog of dust hung so thickly in the air that it had begun seeping into other parts of the building through the vents.

Any visitor to the museum in early February might have thought that the floor was being gutted, but there was something odd about this scene of destruction: In the middle of it all, a kind of rough gray tower of what appeared to be cement rose from floor to ceiling, looking in places like detritus designed by George Lucas for the planet Tatooine, in other places like something left by the Incas and in others like the underside of an old highway overpass. More than anything else, it looked like the product of a very large rogue 3-D printer infected by a virus, randomly downloading schematics and plans.

But the object, expected to be one of the showstoppers at "The Ungovernables," the museum's Triennial — which opens on Wednesday with more than 50 young artists from around the world — was made by human hands. Using mostly clay, one of the world's oldest and plainest art-making materials, a crew of six men and women from Argentina assembled, shaped and carved the piece, working seven days a week for the last month under the direction of a 31-year-old sculptor named Adrián Villar Rojas.

Until only a few years ago, Mr. Rojas, who was raised and educated in Rosario, Argentina's third-largest city, was little known even in his own country, working out of a studio in his parents' garage. But he rapidly gained a following after beginning to show in Buenos Aires, and he was chosen to represent his country in the 2011 Venice Biennale, where a towering forest of his deranged clay structures became an unexpected hit. (Roberta Smith, in The New York Times, proposed that they might be a "new kind of visionary assemblage.")

He began using clay partly because it was cheap and plentiful and its crude physicality tacked against the ethereal look of a lot of Conceptualist-influenced work by established Argentine

artists. But the clay itself — because of what happens when it dries — began to shape his ideas about the kind of work he wanted to make.

“Look at this, we finished this only yesterday,” he said recently in strongly accented but perfect English, showing a visitor to the New Museum a piece of the sculpture. Mottled gray and scarred by deep cracks, it looked as if it could have just been unburied by archaeologists. “It’s an instant ruin,” said Mr. Rojas, who looked almost ancient himself, his hair and glasses dusted with clay powder. “It’s the gift the material gives us.”


A Colossus in Clay Speaks a Younger Generation’s Message

He thinks of such pieces as ruins from the future, the wreckage of civilizations yet to come and difficult even to imagine, beyond the fact that they will eventually collapse, as civilizations have an unfortunate habit of doing.

Like many ruins, the piece itself will be demolished, not long after the Triennial ends on April 22, both because there is no good way to take it apart to get it out of the museum and because, Mr. Rojas says, “I really love the idea of not having a body of work.”

The crew that helps build his monstrosities is less like a group of studio assistants than like a band, with Mr. Rojas as lead singer and one of the songwriters. Over the last two years, as his star has ascended, the group has traveled like a band on extended tour, tramping from Ecuador to Germany to Mexico to Colombia to Italy to France and now to New York, creating pieces in each place as a kind of impromptu performance. While the sculptures are not improvised, exactly, they incorporate ideas from everyone in the group and evolve as they are built.


A Marathon Performer With Plenty of Steam Left: Captain Kirk’s Latest Mission

The group’s modus operandi, to be constantly in motion and seeming to make up the rules for itself as it goes, is one of the few readily identifiable things it shares with the 34 individual artists, artist groups and temporary collectives who make up the Triennial.

The show’s curator, Eungie Joo, spent a year and a half traveling to more than 20 countries to choose the participants, most born between the mid-1970s and the mid-1980s. Eating lunch in the museum’s lobby recently with Mr. Rojas, she said the first thing she had to recognize as she set out to assemble a representative picture of the work of young artists around the world — the goal of the Triennial — was that “it’s a mission that admits its failure before it starts”; the generation is just “too diverse and complex for many kinds of generalizations.”

But she saw these artists as united by having come of age in an era of disillusionment, many in countries and regions that had overthrown colonialism only to suffer under dictatorships, global

economic crises and other endemic political and cultural problems. (The show, with a concentration on the Middle East, Asia and South America, includes only three American-born artists.)

Though Ms. Joo started her search before the inception of Occupy Wall Street and even before the first Arab Spring uprisings, the motivating spirit of both movements seems to suffuse the show. Jonathas de Andrade, 29, a Brazilian artist in the Triennial, expressed the propensity of his generation of artists this way: “Once we stop moving, we are a simple picture. When we move, we produce constant reflections on many circumstances. We adapt. We interfere. We provoke.”

Judged on the criteria of hustle alone, Mr. Rojas is certainly a model of the generation. Besides creating the monumental piece for the New Museum, titled “A person loved me,” he and his crew have also begun work on a large related outdoor sculpture that will go on display in the World Financial Center Plaza for a month, beginning on March 1. It was commissioned by Arts Brookfield, which handles cultural programming for the public spaces of the Brookfield real estate company.

When Mr. Rojas and the others arrived in New York to begin work on the projects on Jan. 6, their plane landed at dawn, and they were at work at the museum by 9 a.m., for the first of many 12-hour workdays. On the spot, they not only conceived the New Museum sculpture so that pieces of it could fit inside the elevators and through the doors of a nearby studio owned by the museum; they also developed a brand-new, lighter-weight method of building, applying the clay to prepared pieces of polystyrene.

Standing in the studio one morning with Ms. Joo, Mr. Rojas added proudly that even some of the polystyrene itself was acquired “thinking on our feet,” scavenged from the New Museum’s Carsten Holler show, which recently closed.

“What’s he’s saying,” Ms. Joo said, smiling, “is that they were going through our trash. But, hey, you know, we’re cool with that.”