

FIGURE



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conversation with **DÉBORA DELMAR**
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Residence 398, Dog pen pet puppy playpen metal exercise play fence for indoor/ outdoor, red ceramic oil burner cut out house wax melt warmer Christmas decoration, Variable dimensions, 2022.

SANDY DI YU *in conversation with*
DÉBORA DELMAR

SY How did you become an artist?

DD It was something that I always wanted to do. I started my studies in Mexico City, at the UNAM, the national art school where I spent a year. After that, I attended a summer programme at the School of Visual Arts (SVA) in New York, and then applied for the BA. I lived in New York for almost five years from 2007 to 2011. It was an interesting time to live there because I moved right before the market crash in 2008.

SY Your current work is quite specifically about a realm of interrelated themes. Do you think being in this setting at this specific time and experiencing the 2008 financial influenced this?

DD The 2008 financial crash was the first time I was really aware of how far-reaching the effects of the globalised economy were. Consequently, creating a devaluation of the Mexican *peso* against



the US dollar doubling its former highest devaluation from 1994.

SY You used to produce work under the name Debora Delmar Corp. Why did you move away from this? What was the story behind implementing the name in the first place?

DD When I was studying at SVA, which was located in the former Google building in Chelsea, I became interested in corporate identity and its influence on society. During this time, it came into US legislation that corporations would be treated as individuals when paying taxes. Conceptually, this name was intended to remove the work I was exhibiting from myself as an individual person, but after several projects where it became obvious that I was an individual, I decided to move away from this identity.

SY Your practice involves in-depth research on these really timely topics. What is it about art, and in particular your chosen formats of non-discursive art, that lets you explore these topics that other more traditional forms of research and presentation does not allow?

DD I became interested in conceptual art as a way to explore ideas through art-making. It's not about presenting straightforward information, but rather a way to investigate issues and generate questions through art.

SY I suppose your work isn't trying to express a final thought so much as further the investigation into a particular topic.

DD Yes, it is and it is this way it is a form of criticism or analysis of these topics. I think there is often a misunderstanding of the word criticism, because it is thought of as being negative. But criticism is actually a way to investigate and further expand on ideas.

SY Right, so you are not putting any sort of normative interpretation to anything. You're not saying any of this is good or bad.



“TERMS AND CONDITIONS”, Exhibition view, Disneyland Paris, Perth, Australia, 2022. Photographer: David Atwood.



BANK (artist), Automatic electronic piggy bank ATM password money box cash coin saving box 2, 13.5 × 12 × 19 cm, 2022.

DD

Exactly. I'm interested in these topics mainly because they affect the world around me and the way we experience our everyday lives. It's not as simple as saying "capitalism is bad" as we already know that. It's already been said.

SY

So, you wouldn't label your work political?

DD

I do think my work is political, but I wouldn't label my work as political art. I think political art can be problematic because it's often confined to the artworld, which is hyper-privileged and very insular. I'm not saying all political art fails, but I think there's a fine line that's complicated to navigate.

SY

I absolutely agree with you, but I do wonder if some people might think of this as a rather cynical take?

DD

It's important to keep this in mind, yet it doesn't mean I disqualify all political art or political actions made by artists. For example, I was recently asked by Mexican artist Pedro Reyes to create a banner for his project titled Artists Against The Bomb, which is a campaign against the use of nuclear weapons, to which I contributed. These are all images that are free to be used and reproduced so they are not for profit. The problem, I find, is that a lot of times political art ends up just illustrating these problems and I think this is questionable, the act of selling an artwork of this kind, profiting from problems that real people are living with, that you as an artist may not necessarily be privy to.

SY

Your work is concept-based, and whilst there is a certain aesthetic behind it, it's not confined to the rapidly changing tides of aesthetic trends. Do you think this makes it easier for you to navigate these trends that dominate image-based media?

DD

I do feel removed from trends in mediums that have a larger stake in aesthetics, such as painting, which due to its commercial value has also





“[]”, Exhibition view, Interface Gallery, Oakland, US, 2020.
Photographer: Suzanne L’Heureux.

regained popularity in the past years. This was noticeable in the volume of paintings exhibited this year at Frieze, where I also had a solo presentation with my Mexican gallery LLANO. My installation coincidentally also included a series of works that were hand painted by a Mexican *rotulista* (sign painter) into metal panels.

I'm interested in exploring the life cycle of objects within my work and how they navigate within a specific context whilst simultaneously reflecting on how I navigate the world, exploring my relationship with the institutions and people I work with.

SY What is your relationship with the people who collect your works or those who are interested in your works as commodities, even when it's first and foremost conceptual?

DD I've had some interesting experiences. For example, one of the works from my exhibition at Galleria Piu in 2019 titled "Stressed Blessed and Coffee Obsessed" consisted of a series of disposable coffee cups to be displayed around the periphery of the gallery. To my surprise, this work was purchased by a major collection in Italy.

SY Great name, by the way.

DD Thanks, it's an appropriated title from a millennial catch phrase I found online.

SY Do the works come with instructions?

DD I developed an instruction-based process for production when I lived in Mexico after returning from the US as I was being invited to exhibit abroad. This started as a practical solution, but later it became an integral part of my process and a conceptual strategy I've adopted within my work. When a work is sold, I often provide instructions on how the work should be stored as well as presented when being exhibited.

SY Do you do this for all your works?



iPhone Photo Archive, Laser engraving on wood, brass frame, Variable dimensions, 2019.



“Stressed, blessed and coffee obsessed”, Exhibition view, Galleria Più, Bologna, Italia
2019. Photographer: Stefano Maniero.



“Stressed, blessed and coffee obsessed”, Exhibition view, Galleria Più, Bologna, Italia
2019. Photographer: Stefano Maniero.

DD

There are some works that require more specific instructions than others depending on their form. Yet for every exhibition I write a text titled *Brief* which functions as a glossary for the references, materials and production processes within my exhibitions as well as instructions on how the works should be presented.

SY

Has living in so many places influenced your work?

DD

I became a British Citizen this year, which has inspired some of my recent works. An example of this is the series *Locator, 2022*, which is a series of house lights that display the addresses I've lived in since moving to London. Before my time studying in New York, I grew up heavily influenced by American culture whilst living in Mexico. Due to Mexico's proximity with the US, both the Mexican economy and people are heavily influenced by them. They're also affected by foreign businesses entering the country due to more affordable factory production, as well as the development of a tourist industry in Mexico which heavily relies on foreigners. In the nineties, treaties such as NAFTA was implemented to regulate trade and immigration between the North American countries. Several of these issues have informed many of the themes I'm interested in exploring within my work.

For the 2020 Femsas Biennial held in Michoacán, Mexico, for example, I presented a large installation focusing on the production and distribution of avocados in the state of Michoacán. I worked with local artisans to make reproductions of avocados with local craft techniques utilising wood, ceramics, and copper. These were placed within Imbera brand industrial refrigerators, which is also owned by Femsas. Femsas, for context, is a large corporation, which also owns Coca-Cola in Mexico.



LOCATOR (43), Beautiful lamp for house number Modena 7655 black, plexiglass, Variable dimensions, 2022.



“Liberty”, Exhibition view, Galleria Più, Bologna, Italia, 2022.
Photograher: Stefano Maniero.



“Liberty”, Exhibition view, Galleria Più, Bologna, Italia, 2022.
Photograher: Stefano Maniero.

SY

Last year, you had your first solo exhibition in your hometown of Mexico City in 10 years or so, which included a lot of nods to your personal life and childhood. How do you reconcile this personal history with your wider research? Does the fact that it was situated in your hometown change or influence your practice?

DD

I have been working around the theme of property and home ownership as I'm interested in its influence on the origins of capitalism. For my exhibition at Llano, I focused on the current issue of gentrification in Mexico City, which has been influenced by the influx of digital nomads in Mexico during the pandemic. One of the major components of the exhibition, titled "Castles", was an inflatable sculpture which depicted the Chapultepec Castle located in Mexico City. I used the Chapultepec Castle as a reference to Mexico's history of foreign invasions, firstly by the Spanish colonisation and later during the war with the US. In this war, Mexico lost half of its territory. The Castle is coincidentally located in what is the heart of the neighbourhoods which have been highly gentrified recently. Having lived abroad during the past eight years, each time I go back to Mexico, the changes become more evident.

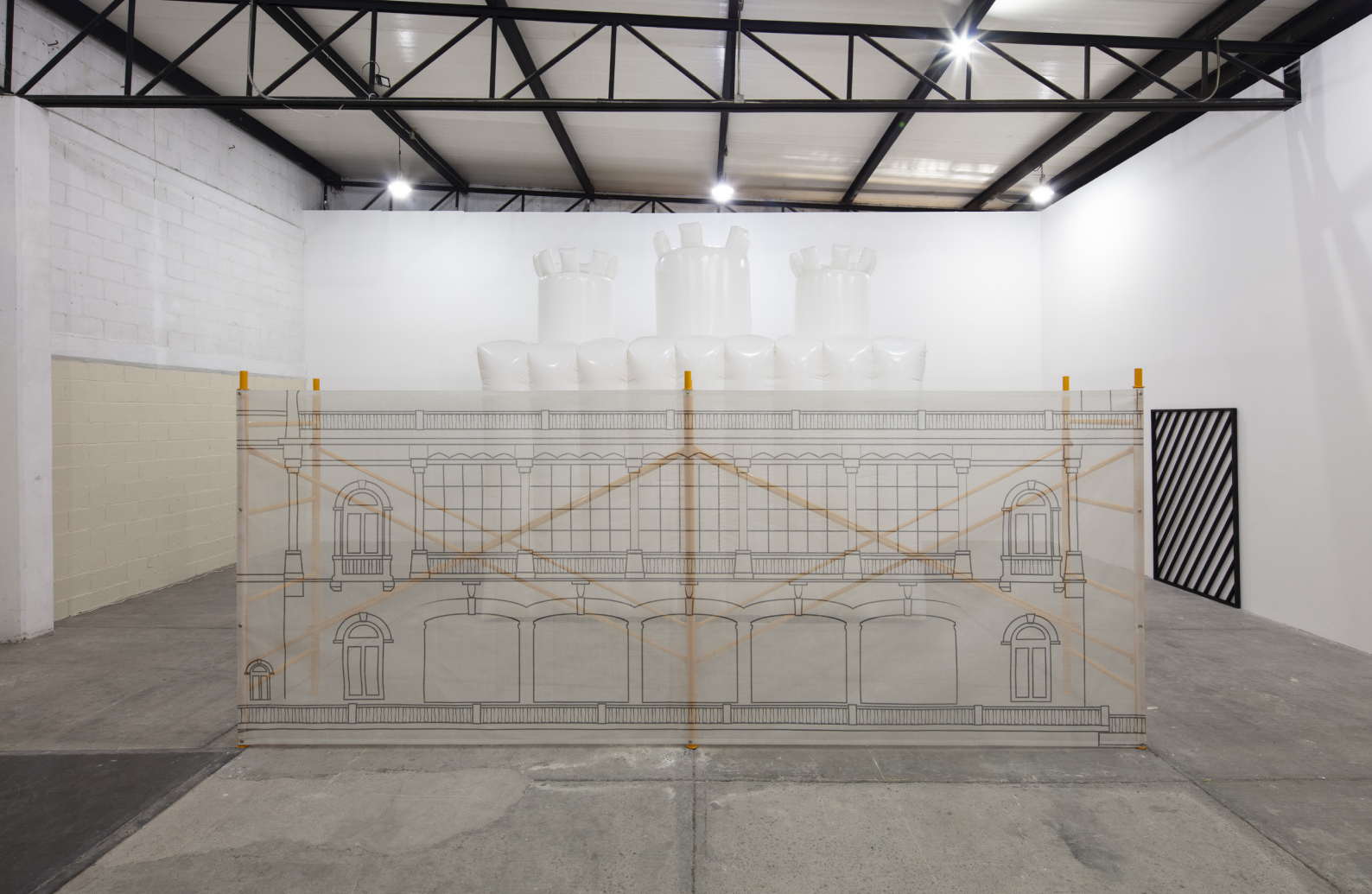
Another work in the exhibition was a reconfiguration of a work I exhibited at Material Art fair in 2020, where I worked with welders who produce gates for homes such as the ones found in the neighbourhood I grew up in. For Material, the work was presented as a gate covering the entrance of the art fair booth, yet for this second iteration the individual gate panels were exhibited against the walls of the gallery. Another version of the series *Locator*, this time displaying the house number of the house I grew up in Mexico, was located at the exhibition entrance.



“Castles”, Exhibition view, Llano, Mexico City, Mexico, 2023.
Photographer: Ramiro Chaves.



Community, Comisised metal gate parts, Variable dimensions, 2023.
Photographer: Ramiro Chaves



“Castles”, Exhibition view, Llano, Mexico City, Mexico, 2023.
Photographer: Ramiro Chaves.

SY Is there a visa specifically for digital nomads in Mexico right now?

DD I'm not sure if something like that exists. In contrast with the tough measures on Mexicans immigrating to the US, most digital nomads who happen to be American don't need visas to go to Mexico. But what has transpired instead is that Airbnb and the government of Mexico City have signed a contract to encourage digital nomads to move there. But interestingly, I've heard that recently, with the instability of the current economy, the Mexican *peso* has gained strength and because of this a lot of the people that had moved to Mexico are now starting to go back to the US.

SY Since moving here to the UK and attending the postgraduate programme at the RA, how has your practice changed?

DD I came from a more conceptual practice and the RA was more object-making-oriented. It was a good time for me to explore new ideas within my work and forms of making, especially focusing more on individual works within my installations. I have always been interested in the contexts and places I inhabit, hence the location of the Royal Academy playing an important role in some of the works I produced during this time. For the series titled *Canto (Mayfair businessmen)*, after Barnett Newman, for example, I utilised off-cut fabrics for business suits, which I acquired through a local tailor from Saville Rowe. Another work I produced during this time, which was part of my degree exhibition titled *LOAN*, was composed of three suits from Paul Smith's personal collection. Paul is also a patron at the schools, and he loaned these to me for the duration of the exhibition.

SY Thinking about your research process, it seems you have



Loan, 21.05.–1.06.2019, Three suits from Paul Smith's personal collection, locks, clothing rail, Variable dimensions, 2019.



“Couriers”, Exhibition view, Weston Studio, Royal Academy of Arts, London, United Kingdom, 2019. Photographer: Andy Keate.



Commercial Space, Red Herring Navy twill tailored fit 2 button jackets, digital print on Silk Sensation (Poly) 90gsm, Variable dimensions, 2019. 25

these overarching ideas of what you're interested in, but current events and locality feed into these ideas to direct them a certain way. Would you say that's true?

DD Yes, both have an impact in the production processes in my work as well as the themes I explore in my practice. When I focus on a more specific topic, then I begin with further research through readings or site visits.

SY And is your typical research method often multi-pronged like this?

DD Yes. Besides more traditional forms of research, I constantly take photos with my phone documenting, objects or places I'm interested in. These images later inform works that I produce.

SY Was it a similar process with *Liberty Roses*, which was presented at Frieze?

DD Those works were a combination of both processes. I first encountered Liberty's Carline Rose print when walking around Soho as it was displayed on the cladding covering its facade during recent renovations. For *Liberty Roses*, I hired a sign painter to replicate images that I provided, which were taken from Liberty's e-commerce website. I became interested in Liberty's history and its role in importing luxury goods from the former British colonies. The mock Tudor building is one of the staples of this area in London. Liberty's began to produce their own flower print fabrics which became highly popular amongst foreign clients and within the UK. This ties into my interest in the global circulation and production of goods, how they navigate and influence different cultures. Coincidentally, in preparation for the British citizenship test, I learned about the flowers of each country, the rose being the flower of England. Presenting this work at Frieze pointed towards the location of the fair.



Liberty Roses (Yellow Roses, Blue Roses), Acrylic paint on metal panel,
50 × 50 cm, 2023.



Liberty Roses (Yellow Roses, Blue Roses), Acrylic paint on metal panel,
100 × 70 cm, 2023.

SY And what about the rest of your presentation with LLANO at Frieze?

DD I'm interested in working within the context in which my work is presented by transforming the space or influencing people's movement within it. For my presentation at Frieze, the main sculpture titled *Caballero Alto*, which was placed in the centre of the booth, forced visitors to circle around it. The sculpture therefore functioned as an architectural feature within the booth.

SY How does architecture feed into your research and production process?

DD I'm especially interested in the psychological influence of architecture. For example, certain scents will trigger particular behaviours. Orange is a scent which is commonly used in car dealerships to increase sales as it enhances memory. In my exhibition at Modern Art Oxford titled "Upward Mobility"(2015) I spread this scent throughout the gallery, utilising different powders to infuse sculptures within the installation. This was composed of a series of home stages surrounded by a maze made of hedges and large scale banners.

Prior to this in my first institutional exhibition in Mexico, "BODY BLEND TRADE CULTURE" curated by Daniel Garza Usabiaga, I created an installation around corporatised coffee culture inspired by the influence of franchises such as Starbucks in Mexico. In countries like Mexico, where coffee has been locally grown for centuries, brands like Starbucks have been re-marketing the every day drink as an aspirational lifestyle good. For the works in the show I used coffee to dye objects so that the exhibition space would smell of coffee. I also played ambient sounds of coffee shops, which people commonly listen to in order to improve focus and productivity.



Caballero Alto, Inflatable tower produced by Azteca Inflables S.A. DE C.V,
Variable dimensions, 2023. Photographer : Ramiro Chaves.

SY What are you working on currently?
DD I was one of the 2022 recipients of the Stanley Picker Fellowship, which will culminate in an exhibition at the Stanley Picker Gallery in 2025. I'm excited to work with an institution in the UK again. This being my second institutional solo show in the UK. I enjoy working with institutions because they have a very different approach and in this case I will be working closely with the team at Stanley Picker gallery.

SY How is that going so far?
DD My proposal for the fellowship was to explore money as an object and as a concept, within the context of the current financial crisis as well as by exploring my position as an artist receiving a grant from a private trust through an institution. In my application for the fellowship, I also spoke about how I was interested in the co-dependency that these fellowships accentuate.

I've been having conversations about the fellowship structure with the staff at the Stanley Picker Gallery, as well as researching and visiting the house that Stanley Picker inhabited. This building, designed by architect Kenneth Wood, is located near the gallery, a private road near a golf course. I've been fascinated by Picker's history, who besides being a patron of the arts, produced makeup for the iconic British designer Mary Quant.

The works I present in my exhibition will be informed by this research as well as by the interactions and negotiations I have with the staff at the Stanley Picker gallery and the Stanley Picker Fund.



Gate for imlabor (night time), Window vinyl, Variable dimensions, 2021.



Frozen currencies (table and chairs), 4 Plastic glasses with paper straws, fake ice, coins out of circulation, 4 stainless steel chairs and table, Variable dimensions, 2019.
Photographer: Renato Ghiazza.



Débora Delmar, Figure Figure 2023
Courtesy of the artist

DIRECTION DE PUBLICATION

Mathilde Cassan

mathildeaude.cassan@gmail.com

INTERVIEW

Sandy Di Yu

sandy.d.yu@gmail.com

IDENTITÉ VISUELLE

Atelier Pierre Pierre

hello@pierre-pierre.com

www.figurefigure.fr

[Instagram](#)

[Facebook](#)

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