

Davis Birks at Nina Menocal - Mexico City

[Art in America](#), [Nov. 2003](#) by [John Villani](#)

Davis Birks is a 45-year-old Seattle native who lives and works in Guadalajara, Mexico. While one piece in this show specifically addressed the issue of U.S./Mexican relations, the work generally covered a wide range of themes, using various materials and techniques. The show's title was "Distribucion de Cargas" (Load Distribution), a phrase used in the architectural and engineering professions that here seemed to refer to the convergence of opposites and the balancing of opposing forces.

Malla No. 3 (ELLOS, US) is a sculptural work made of two sections of chain-link fencing, each about 6 feet high and 3 feet wide. Birks used several layers of fencing to create a pair of dense barriers, each of which was topped with several strands of barbed wire. The letters U and S are spray-painted in black onto one section, while the other part has the letters "ELLOS" applied in a similar way. The work's clear reference to cross-border perceptions is underlined by the bilingual text in which "them" (ellos) is opposed to "us" or "U.S."

La Seca ala Meca is a wall-mounted trio of 10-by-8-inch assemblages, each fronted by a glass panel onto the surface of which are etched the Spanish terms for the Koran, the Bible and the Talmud. Behind each panel is a metal plate holding a book. Surprisingly, the volumes Birks uses for each assemblage are not the ones referenced on the glass panels. Rather, they are accounting, geometry and chemistry textbooks. The artist seems to be suggesting a covert connection between science and religion, between "dry" subjects ("seca" means "dry") and objects of passionate faith ("meca" refers to the Islamic holy city).

Te conozco is an installation consisting of three wall-mounted, mirror-equipped boxes. As you stand in front of the piece, you look into an eye-level box and see your reflection with the words "te conozco" (I know you) superimposed over your visage. Looking upward to a second mirrored box, you see yourself again with the words "te adoro" (I love you) and finally to a third box at your feet that has the words "te odio" (I hate you).

In a smaller room of its own was Sirvientes Sociales (Social Servants), which consists of seven handcarts piled high with sheets of corrugated cardboard. The top foot or so of each stack had been carved to create a relief of the upper part of a man's head. Throughout the show, Birks made similarly inventive use of everyday materials as he sensitively, and sometimes confrontationally, explored the complexities of making passages between nations, languages, religions and cultures.