

**Davis Birks and
the power of place**

Worth

Less

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We live surrounded by an indelible, often unobserved presence. The strange, unknowable force of place-all that makes up the complex energy that encases us. Place will fix itself to you, infiltrate your bones and circulate into the deep recesses of your body. When two distinct and separate places come to act upon a single body, that singular energy becomes fractured. The pull of both places creates a division within the self. One becomes both insider and outsider, embodying both places and their relationship to one another. Two maps overlap one another and the boundaries become difficult to discern.



Davis Birks is an artist divided so. US-born and raised, he has lived and practiced in Mexico for over 30 years. His existence embodies a complex dual-nationality, both hailing from and residing in two places locked in a relationship dominated by complex imperial power dynamics. The exposure to both places situates Birks in a unique position, exposed to a place devastated by imperialism, while being raised in a nation that benefits from and legitimises that exchange.

This devastating dyad marks a number of Birks' works which deal with the colonial economic exchanges that maintain a constant and putrid state of suffering within Mexico. In his 2009 work, *Empire 2*, US-dollar bills are folded into small pyramids, forming a floor-based map of Mexico. The unfinished 13-step pyramid on the US-dollar bill symbolises the original 13 states and the envisioned territorial growth of the American nation. The economic dependency of Mexico is, for Birks, testament to the continued expansion of the US empire, concealed now within a complex system of economic control.



'Empire 2' 2009 (detail)

Greed and suffering also underscore *War Monument* (2009). Cut into a US-dollar bill are two silhouettes of soldiers. The figures are locked in battle; their guns pointed at one another in a stalemate of threat. The shapes are painfully common in their figuration; literal cardboard-cut-outs of the spectacle of war. There is a hopelessness, an inevitability to the silhouettes' common altercation. Their miniature battle takes place on a US-dollar bill, a reminder that money provides the foundation for this exchange. National debt is raised to finance war, fuelling financial dependency controlled by elites. These powerful individuals benefit from the never-ending cycle of US-led conflict, while the state remains marred in debt, suffering and conflicted morality.

Economics rarely features in artists' critique of the socio-political landscape. Yet as Birks so uncomfortably proves, it underpins the human condition we so often lament. As witness to the systemic drug-related violence that vandalises Mexico, Birks challenges his viewers to consider their own culpability. In his *US/MX* series (2008), two shiny, racing-red car doors are pitted with bullet holes shaped into the maps of the US and Mexico. The side mirrors turn to face the viewer, catching their reflected image. A challenge of self-introspection. While it is easy to think of oneself as outside the illegal drug trade, the low wages and economic depravity within Mexico underpins this industry. Birks doesn't shy away from questioning his viewers, nor does he overlook the complexity of the capitalist system, its decentralised and multilayered nature which makes singular blame futile. None of us are innocent bystanders.



War Monument, 2009
cut and folded United States
one dollar Federal Reserve note
6.7 x 15.5 x 6 cm.



US/MX, 2012

Intervention with automobile doors
270 x 122 x 50 cm.



DeTuR, La Sala, 2012 (detail)

Found eroded fragments of brick and mortar
with new brick and sand. Dimensions variable.
view: Galería Omar Alonso, Puerto Vallarta, Mexico

The story of Birks' practice is not simply summarised by works that interrogate US politics. His practice is diverse and expansive, refusing to acquiesce to ridged, essentialist categories. Birks' career rejects specialisation. Citing Heidegger, Deleuze and Guatarri, he is as much interested in the complexity and possibility within an artist's practice as within the world itself.

An ongoing, career-long experimentation with discarded industrial materials sits parallel with his more overtly political works. An ongoing project *DeTur* (2008) sees Birks surveying waterways, collecting found industrial materials, such as bricks and wood. Discarded, these materials become remade by place, reformed and reshaped by their unknown paths. Part archaeological investigation, part reclamation of waste, the mystery behind these materials, their origins and subsequent journeys, allow them to be viewed anew. Time is the creative force here, it works simultaneously with place to act on and recreate these unwanted remains. They become mysterious, loaded objects, beautiful in their embodiment of the interplay of these unknowable forces.

While Birks' wants to celebrate these stories, he also acknowledges the constructed nature of history and the manipulative forces that often blemish its construction. As part of his ongoing *NeoXuitla: Contemporary Archaeology* project, Birks invited seven historians to write accounts of the history of a collection of found bricks in *Unknown Stories* (2016). Museum-based, Birks worked within the tradition of the archive, subverting its original didactic nature with multiple, often conflicting histories of the objects on display. Again, the political is always present.

History-what we are told, what is claimed to be 'true', and how such narratives influence and form public memory and national identity, is revealed as precarious and open to manipulation.

The history of discarded materials is intimately connected to the capitalist system, one that privileges industry above human dignity and environmental protection. In his early work, *Social Servants* (1989), discarded cardboard and steel work to form ten partly-realised figures. Their heads emerge from the stacked cardboard; an unsettling army of figures peer out at us. Realised out of discarded and useless materials of the everyday, one cannot help but draw parallels between the overlooked, hidden junk of industry and the silenced, undervalued people also trapped within the sculpture. What we choose to overlook and deem valueless exists here as humans are treated like objects, discarded by a system that deems them as disposable as that of the raw materials from which they are made. Like these repurposed materials, people are vulnerable to their environments, shaping their sense of self, altering their beings.



Social Servants, 1988

Cardboard, steel, polyurethane, mounted on a hand truck
each element measures 118 x 65 x 60 cm.
Collection Instituto Cultural Cabanías, Guadalajara, Mexico

There is a sobering sense of injustice and exploitation at the heart of Birks' work. We feel the wasted materials, the wasted lives and the unbearable inequality that creates a cycle of dependency and suffering. What we choose to overlook, discard and deem worthless changes a place and the people within it. Divided between the US and Mexico, Birks has become part of two places that are engaged in an unequal and exploitative exchange. As an embodiment of this divide, Birks recognises that relationship to place is never one-sided. His unrelenting critique of the way power has altered the places that are a part of him, is an act of power in itself. Place and self are interchangeable. They are porous bodies locked together in an oscillating exchange. We have the capacity to change a place as much as it does us.

Sidenote: Social Servants, 1988

You'll notice a date change here. I had for years indicated the year 1989 for this piece. I found a news clipping of an exhibition including this installation with the date January, 1989, and I realized I had finished the work during the Fall of 1988, not in 1989, as I had thought previously. After doing some research with Ruben Mendez on the exhibition Fissures in the Tropics for OPC and taking a closer look at the development of contemporary art in Mexico, I know now this work is one of the first of its kind in Mexico with regard to contemporary art installation, if not the first.

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