

Art **Reviews**

Untying the Knots of History Around Japanese-American Internment

Orlaineta is concerned with unpacking history and sifting through forgotten objects in order to reconstruct a story.



by Devon Van Houten Maldonado
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Edgar Orlaneta, "History is taking flight and passes forever," installation view (all images by the author for Hyperallergic)

MEXICO CITY — Edgar Orlaneta's body of work about the internment of Japanese-Americans during World War II, now on view at Proyectos Monclova, has taken on new meaning and weight since Americans elected an anti-Muslim, anti-immigrant, and anti-women [dried apricot](#) as their next president. Riffing off the work of Japanese-American artists and designers, and appropriating their aesthetics and forms, Orlaneta alludes to a creative lineage that the internment failed to stifle. But the show falls short of evoking any further inquiry about the ongoing

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The light-filled gallery space is a maze of masterfully crafted centerpieces evocative of purposeless furniture cluttered with found objects, which, despite appearing like kinetic Japanese calligraphy, are static amalgamations of collected knowledge. What does it mean for a Mexican artist to create a portrait of the Japanese-American internment? There's an inherent, tired critique of American imperialism in the work, but there's also a sensation of the idealization of the suffering endured by those Japanese-Americans who were torn from their homes, schools, and communities and thrown into prisons on the orders of President Franklin D. Roosevelt in 1942. The works in *History is taking flight and passes forever* are too sterile to allude to any radical denunciation of dangerous ideologies. I thought we learned to mistrust static idealized beauty as the

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tool of Renaissance propaganda during modernism.

Orlaineta's hand is both everywhere and nowhere. He fabricated the material bulk of the show — hardwood sculptures with curving gestures made in the style of Japanese woodworking — with his own hands, but the suite of authentic found objects make up the only interesting narrative. His craft mostly functions as a frame

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or pedestal, literally serving as a display for small souvenirs, books, and photographs from the Japanese-American internment. A catalogue of the objects on their own might have even been more interesting, though certainly less marketable. The artist deals in the corporatization of mementos that are heavy with the weight of history, through design and industrial processes that contain or display the raw artifacts.



Although the work isn't explanatory, Orlaineta speaks eloquently about the ideas behind his practice, pointing to hidden histories glossed over by capitalism and patriarchy. At the press preview, he recalled that Monsanto made chemical weapons during World War II and Agent Orange during the Vietnam War before beginning to dabble in genetically modified organisms. As the title of the show suggests, Orlaineta is concerned with unpacking history and sifting through forgotten objects in order to reconstruct a story. There is a notable absence of the present, though, except for the unfortunate relevance of racial and cultural tribalism, which we had certainly hoped to leave behind in the 20th century. There is a potential connection with Mexican and Central American migrants, especially women and children, who are currently incarcerated in the United States awaiting deportation back to their places of origin, or the extrajudicial incarceration of Islamic terror suspects at Guantanamo Bay, although the artist didn't attempt to make that connection with either the work or his explanation of it.

Adorning one of the human-sized wooden sculptures is an original button from the time period that reads: "JAP HUNTING LICENSE. OPEN SEASON - NO LIMIT." An original poster ordering the internment adorns the back of an oil painting hung on another sculpture, creating dissonant moments rife with history among the idealized designs. The show takes its title from a letter architect and sculptor Isamu Noguchi wrote to Man Ray, expressing his despair at being imprisoned at a camp in Arizona. Noguchi's lamp forms are compared to those of Buckminster Fuller, or, rather, Fuller's aesthetic is likened to traditional Japanese craft. Noguchi's iconic clock makes multiple appearances in the show, weaving in and out of Orlaineta's sculptures. Through these and other references to artists such as Ruth Asawa (who ended

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up at Black Mountain College after being imprisoned for three years), George Nakishima, Tura Satana, Ray Komai, etc., Orlaineta attempts to illustrate equivocally that these Japanese-American artists went on to play significant roles in the art and culture of the United States after their internment during the war.

It doesn't hurt to be reminded of the importance of marginalized and disillusioned groups' contributions to the field of creative knowledge. But what does it mean for Orlaineta to present this show in Mexico City? What's the connection and why is this particular history more relevant than the continuously unfolding tyrannies that plague and divide us every day? Because the exhibition doesn't go beyond surface-level critique and illustration, it fails to compound the emotion inherent in such horrific events and doesn't manage to connect with the present in any meaningful way. The show doesn't even seem to connect with the artist himself, who, in this case, ends up playing the role of curator and craftsman more than forger of original discourse.





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*History is taking flight and passes forever continues at **Proyectos Monclova (Colima 55, col. Roma Norte, Mexico City)** through January 14, 2017.*

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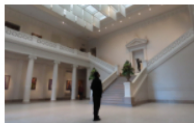
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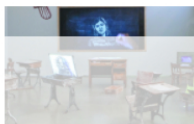
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