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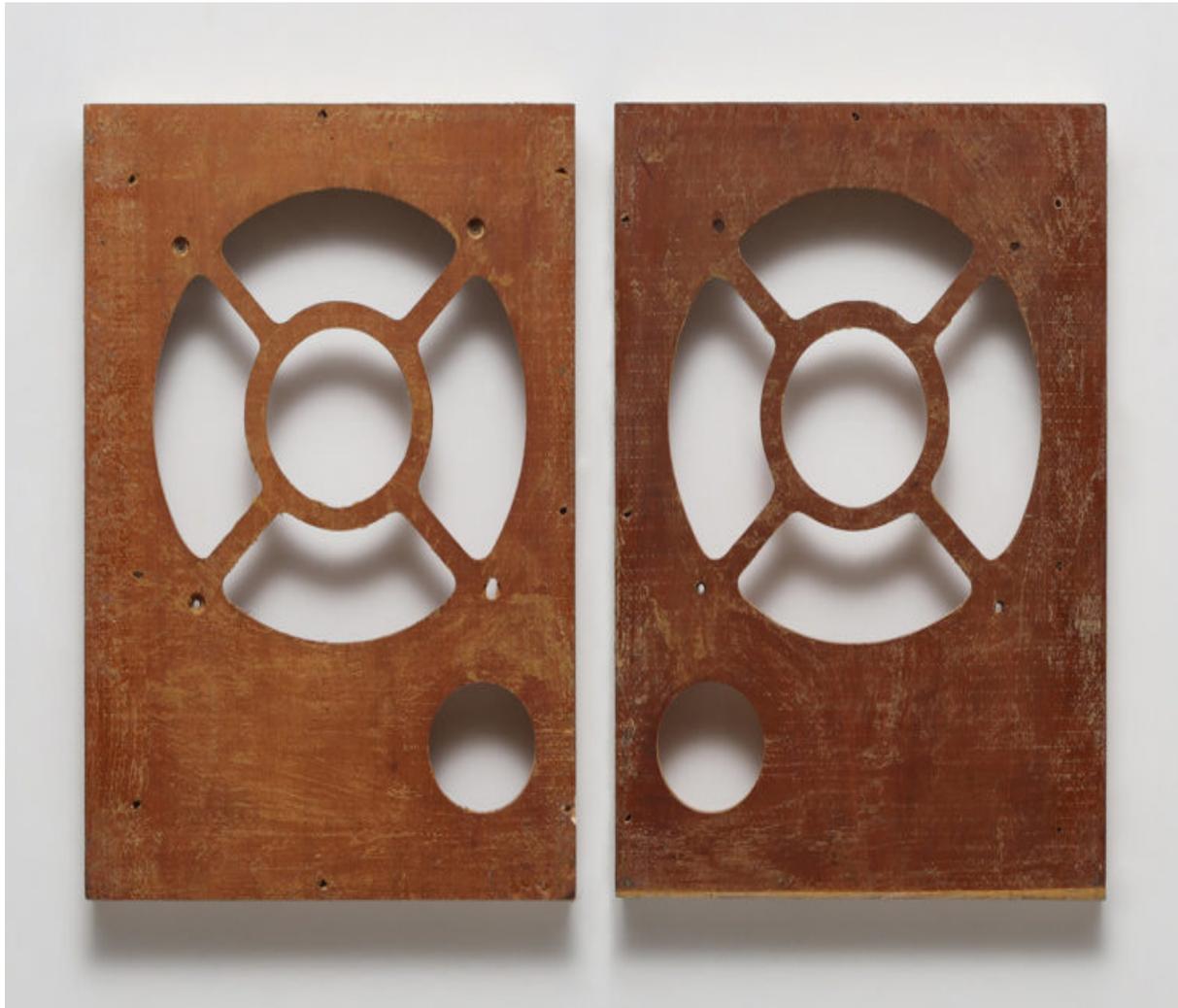
Gabriel DE LA MORA

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Making Art from the Remnants of Everyday Activities

by [Devon Van Houten Maldonado](#) on April 26, 2016



Gabriel de la Mora, “T-23 (a-b)” (2016), discarded vintage stereo speaker cases (courtesy the artist)

MEXICO CITY — Architect-turned-conceptual artist [Gabriel de la Mora](#)’s work is cold and formal to the point of appearing scientific, yet it is layered with history. A practice of deconstruction balances out his rigorous production process, which sometimes spans years of documentation and cataloguing, resulting in ironic and contradictory proposals that are impossible to realize. With his first European solo show now on view at [Timothy Taylor](#) in London — and presentations of his work coming up at [Frieze New York](#) and [the Drawing Center](#) in New York — de la Mora is attracting international interest for his ability to create new work from residual material cast aside as everyday detritus devoid of conceptual or aesthetic value.

“It’s everything and nothing,” he repeated during our conversation, clearly excited by the juxtapositions occurring in his studio. Some of de la Mora’s works explore the possible and impossible, like a series of completely burned pages that remain intact, suspended in their wavy, burnt state. Other works bring to light things that have been hidden for centuries, like an ongoing series of 17th century ceiling sections, which are stretched like canvases and displayed on the gallery wall. Through obsessive accumulation and a unique way of seeing, de la Mora uses yesterday’s utilitarian objects to create artworks with philosophical implications about the nature of art, material temporality, and context-based value structures. Contradictory to their formal nature, the works revel in their own fragility and impermanence.



Installation view of ‘Gabriel de la Mora: Serial’ at Timothy Taylor (photo courtesy Timothy Taylor, London) (click to enlarge)

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Devon Van Houten Maldonado: *I want to begin with the ideas of collecting and accumulating. Where do these come into your practice and where do they take your work?*

Gabriel de la Mora: Maybe my work is what you don’t see. In this process there are a number of steps created. To begin, part of the idea is to photograph and document certain things or materials that catch my attention — it could be at a flea market or here in the studio. Ideas begin to

accumulate or collect and there are many ideas that are repeated and repeated. Sometimes five or 10 years pass from the first idea to when I begin to take it seriously in order to make a series.

In the moment I see that a material is perfect for something, I begin to collect a great variety of that type of material and in the studio we begin to classify. From that classification, which is a form of collecting or archiving, the series begins to take form. Rather than throw away the residual material, it's all saved in order to make something else. It's interesting how something that is left over can become something new. There are repetitive forms or maybe attitudes that have to do with the way we work in the studio, but everything is documented and each series or repetition creates something new.

DVHM: *There's an interesting play between generating ideas through experimentation and also a process that seems totally scientific — the obsessive cataloguing, documenting, etc. It also has to do with this game of destruction and construction. You find something and, in a certain way, you destroy it in order to build something new.*



Gabriel de la Mora, “PAI / 7 – I f” (2015), discarded aluminium plate from offset printing press, mounted on wood (courtesy the artist and Timothy Taylor, London) (click to enlarge)

GM: I don't like to call myself or see myself as an artist. It has to do with the basis for philosophy, which is to ask “why?” That is where the concept of what an artist can be begins. One question leads to another, and so on, infinitely. It is to experiment and ask questions. That's why I never like to call myself a painter, sculptor, or drawer. To reduce art to a technique seems totally unfair to me.

I think it goes beyond the virtuoso, which can be the worst defect of an artist today — focusing only on talent.

The idea is to take things to the limit. Since I was an architect, I knew that if I was going to design a door, I didn't want to repeat the concept of what I know as a door. So as an artist, if I am going to paint, I'm not going to repeat or box myself into the technique or narrative that generates this virtuoso idea of what defines painting. I like to take it further and question what painting is. What can I find in painting, beyond the definition? The best way I found to see architecture, is when I left it in 1996. The best way to look at painting is when you stop painting.

In my work, what looks like a painting wasn't made by the human hand, but by the destruction of something over time. That unmaking or the remainder that has been marked by some action or piece of information can be reestablished or reconstructed in order to make an artwork. We don't necessarily have to accumulate and build something because undoing something is also doing something. "[Erased de Kooning Drawing](#)" by Robert Rauschenberg is a good example. It's not necessary to make in order to create, because unmaking something can lead to the creation of something — an idea, object, or proposal. You have to stop painting in order to have the freedom to see the questions beyond the technical or virtuoso aspect of painting.



Installation view of 'Gabriel de la Mora: Serial' at Timothy Taylor

DVHM: *What does the scientific process of carefully documenting and cataloguing have to do with that?*

GM: It goes all the way back to childhood. I have always loved comparing things. A common example is water, which I noticed a fish could live in perfectly well. But there are other liquids, like alcohol, which a fish cannot live in, even though it looks exactly like water. As a boy I took two fish and threw them into two glasses, one with water and another with alcohol. Of course, the fish in the water swam around normally, while the fish in alcohol convulsed until it died. So then I understood, through this cruel experiment, that two things that look the same aren't necessarily the same.

I love that the question of truth comes into my work. What can be proven and what cannot? Within conceptual art there are questions that, for me, have to do with truth, but truth that cannot be proven. I'm interested in how the first impact of art is visual and how someone who is blind or psychic would perceive my work because they notice things other people generally don't see. As the artist, I can say that something is true, and the viewer can see this whole archive and documentation, and see where I deduced that this could be true.

DVHM: *I'm fascinated by the burned pages, which are now famous. They're these impossible objects. There's the idea of burning knowledge and information, presented as a monochrome, which plays into a lot of your work. There is even a certain action in it because it appears to still be in an animated state, burning. How did that piece happen?*

GM: I have always been a pyromaniac, so I grabbed a piece of paper and burned it. It was about initiating an action over which you have no control. The paper goes from a flat white sheet to an irregular black shape, then becomes gray and disintegrates. I burned another and it had a totally different possibility. I decided to keep going until a whole sheet remained intact. I didn't know if it would happen or not. Every time the paper would burn and just when it was perfect, it would be destroyed. Until at last, I don't know why, one stayed completely black and I remember saying, "wow." I didn't know what it was that caused the piece to remain intact and that, to me, is the piece.



Gabriel de la Mora, “Catalogue of the exhibition” (2009), burned paper (courtesy the artist)

After I did it with the blank pages, I wanted to use my master’s thesis. I knew it was 38 pages and 5 blank pages, so I had to print it over and over. The piece still isn’t done. We have been working on it for 7 years and we still don’t have the 43 pages that are needed.

It’s incredible to me that something, like the sheet of paper, can be made eternal by burning it. In terms of conservation, ash is the most stable substance. No microbe can deteriorate it because it’s already carbon. It is already at the end point. It has reached its maximum quota. It could easily be destroyed and it’s not restorable. Taking something so ephemeral, like burning paper, and converting into the eternal represents two extremes. It’s something that could be impossible, but, in this case, it became possible.

DVHM: *The other series I’m specifically curious about is the speaker covers. The ideas of sound and time as a material and the vibrations of the sound and dust creating a drawing are fascinating.*

GM: Why are the speaker covers marked like that? What could be happening to make the dust mark the fabric with the form of the speaker? I talked with people who repair speakers and I researched online. I noticed that the speakers were covered with the material because of aesthetics or design, which served to cover the whole apparatus behind. The material is the reflection of certain time periods, designs, models, and the like. The speaker sucks and blows air, which is what generates the sound. There are some of these old speakers — especially on radios — that use tube amplifiers and generate an intense heat within the apparatus, which burns the dust that goes in and out of the fabric. With the passage of time — 10, 20, 30, 40, or 50 years — the

music, commercials, news, static, or silence leaves a mark. A tiny bit at a time, the silhouette of the speaker ends up marked on the fabric.



Gabriel de la Mora, “B 6 – RCA 1933” (2014), fabric speaker covers removed from radios (courtesy the artist) (click to enlarge)

These residual materials or documents are nothing and everything to me because they serve a function, but they are left with all this information that generated a drawing on the speaker covers. When the series was displayed in Mexico, the director of the Drawing Center came and, when I told him what made the marks, he said that there is an initiative at the Center to research how sound can create a drawing and these pieces would be perfect for [a show in New York](#).

DVHM: *Tell me about what is on view right now [at Timothy Taylor](#) in London.*

GM: The exhibition consists of 11 pieces in a very clean space, where a possibility of painting is presented. There will be people that see the exhibition without the information or the curiosity to know that the artist didn't make the paintings, but, in fact, they are the leftovers from an offset printing press.

There is a printing press in the studio and at first I was fascinated by the sound, because I didn't see it. I heard that it was similar to minimalist electronic music that I often listen to. This idea of repetitive sound or rhythm that could be from a machine, the "ch-ck-ch, ch-ck-ch, ch-ck-ch." After that, the first time I saw the aluminum plates and the rubber mats in the trash, I was fascinated by them. The texture and color caught my attention and I went curiously to the printing studio and they showed me how it all works. I asked them to give me their used mats and plates when they were done and from there I began to experiment with the material and seeing where the colors and information come from. How certain imperfections create colors and textures, etc. I said "wow," even though it's a machine and a graphic process, and there are a billion of the same, at the end there is a very strong pictorial element in the two very different materials.



Gabriel de la Mora, "MCI / 6 – II f e" (2015), discarded rubber blanket from offset printing press, mounted on wood (courtesy the artist and Timothy Taylor, London) (click to enlarge)

From a very universal concept, like offset printing, you can observe that there are things in Spanish, there are certain plates that say Mexico and, suddenly, there are the words "Mexico City." Other pieces have information about politics, religion, sexuality, or publicity. That is when you start to see more information and make your way from the universal to the specific. From something as global as the offset printing press to something in Mexico, and further in Mexico City. If you keep looking, there are even dates. Everything.

DVHM: *Some of the forms you use remind me of [Donald Judd](#), for example, or we saw the piece in your studio that is very reminiscent of something by [Mark Rothko](#). How does the history of art influence your work, or how do you see your position in it?*

GM: There will always be similarities and likenesses. Like how water looks the same as alcohol, but they aren't the same. I like to find elements or ready-mades, like the speaker covers or the rubber printing mats, that suddenly you see the textures and you put them together with people that I admire greatly. With the printing mats, even though I am just taking them and creating some composition, without affecting the colors or anything, the work is reminiscent of Rothko, Barnett Newman, and a thousand others.

The past, you could say, is always going to exist in the present, even though the present doesn't really exist. While the future becomes past, the past also becomes the future. At the end, we continue to be human and the times change, but there will always be a dialogue between then and now. When we smell something, we are reminded of something else. When we see something, we are reminded of something else. Concepts reemerge, but in a different way. Everything comes back.

*Gabriel de la Mora's exhibition **Serial** continues at **Timothy Taylor** (15 Carlos Place, London, UK) through May 7. His exhibition **Gabriel de la Mora: Sound Inscriptions on Fabric** runs July 15–September 2 at the **Drawing Center** (35 Wooster Street, Soho, Manhattan).*

Gabriel de la Mora**The Drawing Center****Timothy Taylor**