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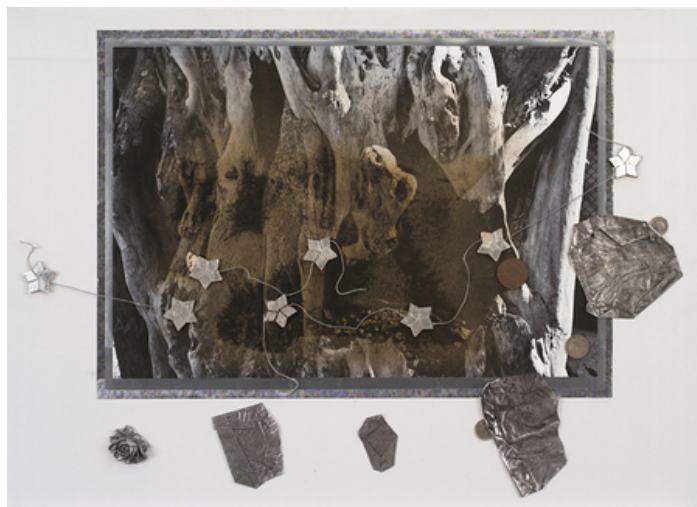
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## Ricardo Brey

GALERIE NATHALIE OBADIA | RUE DU BOURG TIBOURG



Ricardo Brey, *Mono-no-aware*, 2016, ink-jet print, aged silver metallic paper, mirror, metal objects, and coins on canvas board, 20 5/8 × 28 1/2".

Ricardo Brey's recent exhibition, "All that is could be otherwise," comprised mainly recent collages on drawings and photographs, but its physical and conceptual centerpiece was a sculptural work that dates to the dawn of the millennium. For those unfamiliar with the Cuban-born artist who rose to prominence in the 1980s as a founding member of the avant-garde Volumen I collective, *Birdland*, 2001—a large nest made of old coats cradling several ostrich eggs and a swanlike saxophone—introduced two of Brey's hallmarks: a strong association between nature and music (specifically Afro-Cuban and American jazz: in this case, Charlie "Bird" Parker) and his penchant for salvaged materials.

Made shortly after the birth of his daughter, *Birdland* also provided useful autobiographical context. Describing the nest's saxophone occupant, Brey has pointed out that the instrument—surprisingly—was invented by a native of Belgium, where Brey himself has lived since 1992. Other materials like scattered buttons, broken dishes, and rusty South Dakota license plates (these last items collected on a Lakota reservation where Brey spent time in 1985), reference the importance of recycling in the artist's native Cuba, where repurposing refuse is less an ecological concern than a survival skill. Brey's well-worn or distressed found objects give this assemblage, and his work in general, a sense of authenticity and soulfulness that is present neither in Duchamp's pristine appropriations nor in Arte Povera's metaphorical interpretations of poverty.

Appreciated in this context, Brey's most recent collage-based pieces, all dated 2016, profess a profound connection to his homeland. Photographed in Cuba and printed on canvas, board, or paper, large sepia-toned images of tree roots and stumps allude to deforestation, an environmental problem that dates back to colonial-era sugar plantations and that remains a major issue for Cuba today. By decorating photographs with small found objects, Brey honors ancient trees in shrine-like assemblages. The massive root system depicted in *Mono-no-aware* is garlanded with sparkling mirrored stars. In *Portrait* two small cowrie shells and a leather strap glued onto an image of a hollow tree suggest a reproachful, anteater-like totem. And in *Voyage*, Brey underscores the importance of networks and connections by collaging toy train tracks and spools of string onto a photograph of the base of a tree.

Bringing language into the mix, Brey features texts such as excerpts from a Spanish translation of Galileo's sixteenth-century lectures on Dante's *Inferno* in four large drawings in pencil, ink, or graphite, also from 2016. Here, collaged elements like small metal stars and watch wheels lend a navigational aspect to compositions made largely of concentric and overlapping circles. However, allusions to logic and science are confounded by fragmented, backward, and upside-down text (handwritten and collaged), which is often obscured by cloudy smudges of ink, graphite, or pigment. In *Inferno*, the most commanding of the drawings on view, mirrored letters affixed across an ominous gray-black haze spell

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out the title of the work as two separate words: INFER and NO. Inserting the viewer's reflection into a murky confusion, Brey implores us not to make any too-rational deductions. If these drawings are indeed maps or diagrams, they do not chart an easy linear path. On the contrary, his swirling, celestial-inspired compositions suggest emotional and mystical journeys.

—*Mara Hoberman*

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