

Artist Mario García Torres
on the roof of his
studio in the Chapultepec
district of Mexico City

Total recall

Mexico's Mario García Torres
explores the strange sideroads
and deadends of art history



In September 1969, the American magazine *ArtNews* published a cryptic feature about a young, overlooked artist named Oscar Neuestern. It described the rare amnesic condition he suffered, which prevented him from remembering his work from any previous day, and so opening his practice to perpetual reinvention.

'Why was I telling you this story?' asks Mario García Torres, frowning, as if his own memory was suddenly failing him. The Mexican artist is gearing up for his first US survey at Minneapolis' Walker Art Center. It features some 35 works – old and new – spanning video, photography, installation and performance. 'I'm happy not remembering things,' he concludes. 'Without memory, you can experience things in a different way,'

he says, a nod to Marcel Duchamp's claim that he desired to live without memory.

As it turned out, Oscar Neuestern was a product of fiction – a satirical swipe at early conceptualism. García Torres stumbled across the article by chance at CalArts' Library in Los Angeles, where he studied in the early 2000s. And it had a profound effect. 'I started to realise what the power of fiction was,' says the artist, now 43. Soon, he would turn the anecdote into art: *The Transparencies of the Non-act* (2007), a silent visual work made of black and white slides, questioning the role of artists in the building of history.

The appropriation of narratives has since become a central strategy for García Torres to examine the »



limitations of memory. Take *What Happens in Halifax Stays in Halifax* (2004-2006), which revisits a late 1960s art school experiment. The American artist Robert Barry had been invited by the Nova Scotia College of Art and Design to help students realise a non-material work of art. Barry's brief was simple: the group would agree on an idea, and this idea would be the work – as long as it didn't leave the group. Fascinated by the project, García Torres went searching for the students involved in the experiment, determined to find out whether the conceptual work still existed. He managed to gather the group – or what was left of it – back in Halifax, as part of a commission for the Baltic Triennial of International Art. Much to the Mexican artist's delight, the secret had been kept and, therefore, the artwork was still alive. But the reason for its survival was not what he expected. 'For them, the piece was not about materialisation, or even about art,' says García Torres. 'It was about friendship, and memory.'

A blue painting is ready to be shipped to Minneapolis' Walker Art Center for García Torres' upcoming exhibition. Shown in a series, each blue painting will have a title, Vimeo link and password, enabling the viewer to watch a video work by the artist

Stills from García Torres' 2015 *Tetela* video artwork, shot at an abandoned meditation centre in a village near Mexico City



His longing to revisit under-documented artistic moments then took him to Kabul, on what became one of his most ambitious projects. His interest in the work of Italian conceptualist Alighiero Boetti – specifically the period when he ran the infamous One Hotel in the Afghan capital, where he created his emblematic *Mappa* (1971-1973), a series of embroidered maps of the world in the form of Afghan rugs – led to eight years of obsessive investigations. The resulting works included a fictional fax-correspondence with the late Boetti and photographic slide shows of Kabul, and culminated with the essay film *Tea*, documenting García Torres' 2010 visit to Boetti's now-defunct hotel. 'You arrive at the place, and you're finally closer to your idea,' he says. 'But at the same time, everything's gone.'

García Torres' take on time and memory weaves the advances of the past with the promises of the future. The video artwork *Tetela* (2015) depicts the abandoned Centro de Meditación in Santa María Ahuacatlán, a village south of Mexico City. Designed in 1986 by Mexican architect Agustín Hernández, the building fuses pre-Colombian iconography with futuristic features. The video tells the story of two rural boys who stumble across the concrete structure, and quietly explore its ruins. 'It's a kind of fictional documentation of the experience of the work,' explains García Torres of his film, which was preceded by a site-specific exhibition of his paintings and bronze sculptures.

From artists to architects, García Torres unearths cultural figures that offer alternative histories of Western thought. 'That's what I've been doing all my life,' he says, 'trying to build friendships with somebody who's dead, or away. That's why I do research, because that's the only way you can get close to them.'

'Mario is one of the most compelling conceptual artists of his generation,' says Vincenzo de Bellis, co-curator of the artist's upcoming survey at the Walker. 'He is very important today, when there is a tendency to present more traditional media or to investigate extremely contemporary practices,' he says, pointing to the current frenzy around post-internet art.

And while the intention is as sophisticated as the execution is rigorous, the seeming lack of diversity in the artist's chosen subjects could raise a few eyebrows. How have female figures shaped his work? 'Very little,' admits García Torres, before an anecdote comes to mind. In early 1960s Venezuela, a group of activists stormed into Caracas' Museo de Bellas Artes, stealing five French paintings from a touring exhibition to bring attention to political repression in the country. Nancy Zambrano, a member of the group, had (briefly) taken a small work from Cézanne's *The Bathers* series. Nearly half a century later, García Torres tracked down the masterpiece at the Musée d'Orsay and arranged for it to be temporarily taken out of storage. He then met with Zambrano in Paris and, together, went to rediscover the painting – a shared journey into their own personal and political memories. 'A small gesture,' he says. **'Mario García Torres: Illusion Brought Me Here'* is at the Walker Art Center, Minneapolis, from 25 October-17 February, walkerart.org; neugerriemschneider.com