

REGEN PROJECTS

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INTERVIEW

Artist

The Mexican artist Abraham Cruzvillegas, who has created this year's commission for Tate Modern's Turbine Hall, is renowned for creating sculptural works using locally found objects and materials – a practice he has pursued with a vengeance at the museum. The piece he has made for the Hyundai Commission, the first in a new series of commissions sponsored by the South Korean car-maker, is called *Empty Lot*. It consists of an enormous scaffolding structure that extends from both sides of the Turbine Hall's central bridge to support a pair of large wooden platforms, which, in turn, support triangular planters filled with earth taken from London's parks and gardens. Nothing else has been added to the planters but they will be regularly watered and illuminated by lights, some of which have been constructed from components scavenged from the Bankside area by Cruzvillegas, as well as by Mark Godfrey, the Tate's senior curator of international art (Europe and Americas).

The Art Newspaper: What was the thinking behind transferring soil from London's parks and gardens to planters in the Turbine Hall? Was it to do with the famous British obsession with gardening?

Abraham Cruzvillegas: The title of the work is *Empty Lot* and it doesn't refer to gardens at all. It's more of a metaphor for identity. It's not about British identity or Mexican identity; it's a possible portrait of myself as something that grew up out of nothing. But while I am asking this potential question of myself, I also hope that people here – British and others – can ask their own questions about who they are and what it means to be from here, and about the history of this country,

Abraham Cruzvillegas has transformed Tate Modern's Turbine Hall into a living symbol of resourcefulness. By Louisa Buck.

Where hope grows

which, for me, is very much about diversity. We are not homogenous, we are different, and that's what makes us so powerful.

Do you see these samples of soil as a metaphor for a psychological landscape where unexpected ideas can be buried or lie dormant, and you have no idea what might pop up?

Absolutely. Culturally, soil means a lot for all of us – not only those from the UK, but everybody, everywhere. We are not gardening this soil but we are providing the minimum conditions for something to grow, given that we are starting in the autumn and that this [exhibition] will take place mostly during the winter. So the idea

is a test to see what could happen given the minimum conditions. Soil, water and light form a kind of symbolic triangle of what it means for every person to survive. The way I would describe my feeling about my work here is that I am very, very hopeful: it's about making a sculpture, not a landscape, and it's all about hope.

Over the past few years, you have described your work as "autoconstrucción". How does this term apply to your art?

I started calling my work *autoconstrucción* almost ten years ago. In Mexico, it's an everyday word that refers to houses built by the people who inhabit them however they can, using whatever materials they can find without money,

planning permission or a design. Of course, there are many types of this kind of construction all around the world; it can be seen as related to favelas or shanty towns, and they are often similar in the way they are made. But they also have very particular reasons for existing – unfair distribution of wealth, the chaotic growth of the urban context and so on – and in my country, this is related to politics and the economy. It's all about corruption, the destruction of the environment and the unfair distribution of money.

But isn't autoconstrucción also about human resourcefulness and the ingenuity to improvise with whatever comes to hand?

Yes. I also approach it in an optimistic way, in terms of how something can grow out of nothing: not only houses and a neighbourhood, but also a group of people who support each other and – in the case of Ajusco, my neighbourhood in Mexico City – a politically charged community. In Ajusco, the land was volcanic rock and it was almost impossible to build or grow anything there, but my parents' generation succeeded in building their houses using the volcanic rock and whatever materials they could find. They also organised themselves to get the papers to own the land and to obtain services such as water, electricity, sewage, a market, a school, everything. So I started thinking about *autoconstrucción* as a kind of category to apply to my work and also as a condition of my own identity: a kind of mobile that changes its shape according to the need and circumstances in every new space.

You've worked in some big spaces, but the Turbine Hall is the largest yet. How did you approach it?

The real challenge was to appropriate not only the space, but also the tradition of all the projects that have been presented here: how to be part of something, with dignity. I made a sort of exercise of thinking about my practice over recent years, making a synthesis of everything and reducing what I wanted to the minimum. And then I thought that I could – I should – make an empty lot. An empty lot where something can grow: not only plants, bugs and worms, but ideas and many other things. Anything might happen, and everything will be welcome.

• Abraham Cruzvillegas: *Empty Lot*, Tate Modern, until 3 April 2016

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*"Soil, water and light form
a symbolic triangle of
what it means for every
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it's all about hope"*



Digest
ABRAHAM
CRUZVILLEGAS

Born: Mexico City, 1968
Education: Studied education at the Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México
Selected solo shows: Havana Biennale (2015), Museo Jumex, Mexico (2014), Walker Art Center, Minneapolis, Minnesota (2013), Tate Modern, London, with Antonio Castro and Antonio Fernández Ros (2012), Modern Art Oxford, New Museum, New York (2011), CCA Wattis Institute for Contemporary Arts, San Francisco (2009), Centre for Contemporary Arts, Glasgow (2008)
Selected group shows: Sharjah Biennial (2015), Gwangju Biennale, Documenta 13 (2012), Istanbul Biennial (2011)
Represented by: Thomas Dane Gallery, London; Galerie Chantal Crousel, Paris; Regen Projects, Los Angeles
Lives and works: Mexico City