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In Focus: Daniel Steegmann Mangrané

FOCUS

From stick insects to rhombuses: working between the organic and the geometric



Morfogenesis /crispis (detail) 2014, wall drawing, watercolour, linden branch. Courtesy: the artist and Esther Schipper, Berlin; photographs: Andrea Rossetti.

It is a curious paradox that the act of cutting something up can result in the fragmented pieces becoming more closely linked. Two halves of a piece of paper, for instance, seem more directly related after they've been ripped apart. This is a guiding truth, of sorts, for dialectical thinkers from Theodor W. Adorno and Georg Hegel to Fredric Jameson, and it also seems to serve as the motivation behind many works by the Catalan artist Daniel Steegmann Mangrané.

Hanging room partitions – a key feature of several of Steegmann Mangrané's recent shows – embody the dialectic between division

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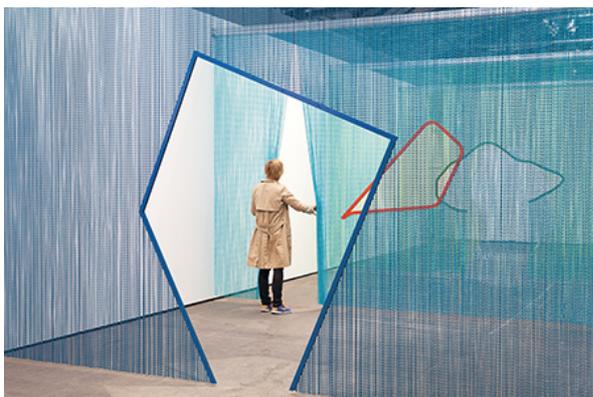
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and union. The partitions closely ape the shape and appearance of the elegant-yet-practical chain screens used in shops in the artist's native Catalunya. But Steegmann Mangrané's versions have one distinct difference: they feature cut-outs created by coated-steel frames. Their craggy forms – which bring to mind the irregularly shaped canvases of the Buenos Aires-based Grupo Madi of the 1940s – suggest other ways of seeing and moving through the space than those presented by conventional doorways. The more we dwell on the unusual shapes and placement of these cut-outs, the more we are drawn into increasingly speculative meditations on the nature of the frame in art. This is another recurrent feature of Steegmann Mangrané's works: a carefully considered slippage from the concrete to the abstract and back to the concrete, from the tangible effects that objects have on us to oblique reflections on major concepts of modernist thought.

From his earliest pieces to the most recent, an insistent confrontation between the vital and the abstract serves as Steegmann Mangrané's platform. In many of the works, simplicity of form underwrites a carefully considered, rigorously executed overlapping of imagery. *Phasmides* (2012), for example, is an abstract film that features stick insects camouflaged among branches against a white background of geometric shapes and figures; *MASKS* (2012), comprises dried leaves painted with gold lines and shapes hung on walls like miniature paintings.

Morfogenesis / cripis (2014), consists of watercolours and drawings made directly onto walls with branches and stick insects blending into them. In all of these works, organic matter and geometric shapes are elegantly intertwined or overlaid. Echoes of the rich and complex legacy of Latin American constructivism ring loudly – from the pioneering Uruguayan artist Joaquín Torres-García to the more broadly influential Brazilian artists Lygia Clark and Hélio Oiticica, both of whom have been cited by the artist as significant to his practice.

In certain works (especially earlier ones), the inscription of geometric figures onto readymade surfaces – photographs, magazine cut-outs – brings to mind a playful, at times delirious, variation on the modernist grid. Some of the images inscribed with the shape of the rhombus – such as *Coqueiros* (Coconut, 2006) and *Menino do rio* (River Boy, 2009) – create an experience of disorientation not unlike that expressed by cubist imagery. Single-point perspective gives way to a two-dimensional plane capable of simultaneous views from multiple perspectives. But, more than an analytics of vision, what comes across in these images is a desire for two-dimensional surfaces that can enclose and contain each other, in much the same way as lived-in, three-dimensional spaces do.



(C, 2014, Kriska aluminium curtains and laser-cut, powder-coated steel frames, dimensions variable

Mimesis is a patent concern for the artist, and the manner in which he explores it varies considerably from one work to another. One early piece – the captivating, optic-haptic installation *Orange Oranges* (2001) – invited visitors to make and drink fresh orange juice while peering out from an enclosure created using an orange photographic filter. The play on the

different meanings of the word 'orange', combined with the experiences of seeing and tasting that the installation facilitates, helps the artist create a sense of dislocation. Like the modular metallic structure Steegman Mangrané has used repeatedly – in, for example, *Resum/Trabalho* (Summary/Work, 2006), *Not Yet Titled* (2007) and *Duna económica/Maqueta sin calidad* (Economic Dune/Maquette without Qualities, 2011) – the sequential structure of *Lichtzwang* (Light Constraint, 1998–ongoing), comprises a series of abstract watercolours in which a graphic element from one painting is carried over into the next, creating a sense of evolving forms. It allows the artist to layer discrete works into a single framework (much as camouflaged animals blend into the background against which they stand), which then functions elegantly as a unified image.

Steegmann Mangrané's work often traces the boundary where nature meets artifice. Lines, circles and rhombuses are drawn, cut and projected onto leaves; the delicate symmetry of branches is split in two. These precise interventions hold a powerful force of attraction: a moment of uncertainty between what is contrived and what is natural. In each of Steegmann Mangrané's intricate compositions, we get to experience that, far from being distinct, the organic and the geometric, the vital and the abstract, define each other.

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is associate professor of Romance Languages and Literatures at Harvard University, Cambridge, USA. He is currently based in São Paulo, Brazil, conducting research for his forthcoming book, *Delirious Consumption*. He is also the editor of *Conceptual Stumblings*, a forthcoming volume on Chilean conceptual art.

Daniel Steegmann Mangrané is an artist living and working in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil. In 2015, his work was included in 'Canibalia' (Cannibalism) at the Kadist Foundation, Paris, France, and is currently included in 'Surround Audience: the New Museum Triennial 2015', New York, USA, until 24 May. From October 2014 to January 2015, his solo show 'Animal que no existeix' (Animal that Does not Exist) was on display at CRAC Alsace, France, between October 2014 and January 2015.

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