

# Juan Ortiz-Apuy

## The Garden of Earthly Delights



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**G44**

Centre for  
Contemporary  
Photography

# The Garden of Earthly Delights

Daniella Sanader

*"Junkspace thrives on design, but design dies in Junkspace."*<sup>1</sup>

There's a blonde braid cuffed with a designer watch curving down across a folded piece of salami; batwings, birds, lizards, and creeping vines tumbling outwards; the smooth naked legs of a Tropicana bottle; numbers one, seven, four, \$9.99, 50 cents, and colours red, blue, primary yellow. Dutch florals and Scandinavian design and National Geographic flora-fauna. Manicured hands that gesture, show off, present, unbox; lines that lattice, forming architectures. Small bodies made headless and fractured under price tags that wander across a red plastic Eames chair. Little yellow ladders propped up on giant hotdogs. A Polaroid camera and an IKEA lampshade; *Le Journal de A. Loos*. All scattered across the white expanse of unpurchased adspace, a blank canvas, an empty page, an unexplored horizon, a just-delivered online shopping order, a new opportunity.

Juan Ortiz-Apuy has named architect Rem Koolhaas' text "Junkspace" as a conceptual beginning for his exhibition, *The Garden of Earthly Delights*. It's a text that sprawls across pages and pages in a long and unbroken paragraph of grandiose aphorisms on the encroachment of a junk food ethos into the built environment. "*Junkspace is like being condemned to a perpetual Jacuzzi with millions of your best friends...*"<sup>2</sup> While it's easy to get pulled into Koolhaas' fractured, messy, and emphatic lines, I'm equally interested in the text's initial presentation: step back from the page and you're met with a uniform block of letters, something smooth, almost monolithic, maybe impenetrable. It's like the luxurious, embossed expanse of a Gucci shoebox on YouTube, just freed from paper and plastic. Of course, we're really here for what's inside, but there's also a peculiar and visceral pleasure in spending a moment with that flat, beautifully glossy surface.

*"Junkspace pretends to unite, but it actually splinters."*<sup>3</sup>

Ortiz-Apuy's *The Garden of Earthly Delights* plays within this push-and-pull of commodity culture: where smooth aesthetics and the breakdown of junky materials intersect, where so-called 'timeless' design bumps up against the inevitable entropy it's attempting to avert. Like where furniture, arranged shiny and perfect in an IKEA catalogue, meets furniture, dented and splintered in the IKEA As-Is section, meets furniture, pieces tossed and forgotten in a landfill. Throughout the exhibition, Ortiz-Apuy blends these disparate arenas of presentation together into a complex and exuberant whole. The sanctified platforms upon which

our commodities are glorified and fetishized, and the abject spaces where they are broken down, merging into one frenetic, uncanny, and brightly-toned landscape not unlike Hieronymus Bosch's infamous titular work, which shares the same name as this show.

*"Junkspace is what remains after modernization has run its course, or, more precisely, what coagulates while modernization is in progress, its fallout."*<sup>4</sup>

Central to *The Garden of Earthly Delights* is a triptych of large-scale handcut collages on foam board. Each is littered with images sourced from a multitude of IKEA catalogues, design history books, and National Geographic magazines. They're glossy bodies of the human, animal and furniture variety, fracturing together amidst the visual apparatus of commerce: price points, bright hues, dynamic lines, modeling hands. Like their early Netherlandish predecessor, they seem to imply a world that is at once disturbing and hellish, yet strangely enticing, and (dare I say it) pleasurable. It's a space that visualizes what Ortiz-Apuy (by way of Hal Foster and T.J. Clark) has referred to as the "bad dream of modernism," wherein the democratic design values of a movement like the Bauhaus have transitioned under capitalism to create a political economy that values sign over object. A system where a product is valued according to its packaging, and everything comes pre-packaged.

Ortiz-Apuy's collages carefully splinter and juxtapose the rarified things we buy and sell, yet in a new video project that sits adjacent to these works, the artist found this labour of disassembling within another (seemingly infinite) source. 'Unboxing' videos on YouTube have been around practically since the website's inception, with the first known iteration of the trend featuring a Nokia E61 cellphone in 2006.<sup>5</sup> For *The Garden of Earthly Delights*, Ortiz-Apuy has collaged together an assortment of unboxings in a new video work. Each clip follows the familiar vocabulary of the online phenomenon: a disembodied narrator represented solely by their hands, a new product (high culture or not) still within its packaging, and the slow, tantalizing unveiling of what lies underneath. In one video, a man gingerly unboxes an Apple Watch from its magnetic charging case, commenting that his hands are shaking: "I can barely handle this... I feel like it's such a... *delicacy*." In another, a man tears open a 7-pack of Fruit of the Loom Men's Basic White Briefs with a (absurdly out of proportion) hunting knife, fingers stroking their seams and edges in a manner that's mostly didactic, yet almost erotic. A grey cat watches with mild interest on the side of the frame. In a video by YouTube user "Fun Toys Collector Disney Toys Review"—with a title like cut-up poetry meets search engine optimization, "Teletubbies Stacking Cups Bubble Guppies Surprise Play-Doh Kinder Shopkins Huevos Sorpresa"—polka dot manicured fingers display, tilt and spin plastic Teletubbies toys, stacked within each other like a nesting doll.

*"Junkspace is sealed, held together not by structure but by skin, like a bubble."*<sup>6</sup>



Juan Ortiz-Apuy, *The Garden of Earthly Delights Series* (detail), hand-cut collage on foam board, 97 x 50 inch, 2016

While it's easy to dismiss this deeply belaboured, yet mundane expression of commodity fetishism, the numbers tell a more complex story. At the time of this writing, Fun Toys Collector's Teletubbies video had 264,622,334 views on YouTube. It's remarkably easy to get pulled into the engrossing world of unboxing videos, watching fingers tear at plastic, palms stroking and squeezing products that are fresh, otherwise untouched by consumer hands. Many of the videos Ortiz-Apuy features here form strangely pleasurable affinities that resonate both visually and texturally: a squeezed-out dollop of shampoo (or is it lotion?) paired with a mound of an equally viscous substance (perhaps shaving cream) in an outstretched palm, a pair of new Apple earbuds echoing the curves of a pre-Columbian Mezcala mask carved in obsidian. In a feature on the phenomenon in *The New York Times*, writer Mireille Silcoff likened the pleasure of watching unboxing to an uncharted form of deep neurological massage,<sup>7</sup> a deeply embodied stimulant perhaps not unlike unboxing's distant relative, ASMR videos.<sup>8</sup> Yet, when engaged within Ortiz-Apuy's topography of fractured IKEA bodies and failed Bauhaus dreams, the thrill of unboxing speaks to the strange ways in which our cherished products accumulate pleasures, sensations, aspirations, fantasies, textures, fetishes—often in ways seemingly unrelated to production or monetary value.

At the centre of *The Garden of Earthly Delights* sits a glossy vase, CNC-machined in smooth, organic curves. It looks at once like the tactile outcome of some of Ortiz-Apuy's chosen video footage in the adjacent room: where hands push and squeeze at soft, viscous materials. Yet it also resembles the strange, similarly-toned structures in the centre panel of Bosch's painting—are they monuments, architectures, living things? Another deep-green plinth features a collection of 3D printed forms, pieces of fruit, found items and pre-Columbian fetish objects. Like much of Ortiz-Apuy's work, these arrangements speak to his multi-layered approach to citation. If Rem Koolhaas and Hieronymus Bosch are his reference points, then so are Hannah Höch and Geoffrey Farmer, Fun



Juan Ortiz-Apuy, *The Garden of Earthly Delights Series* (detail), hand-cut collage on foam board, 97 x 50 inch, 2016

Toys Collector and Marcel Duchamp. In particular, Adolf Loos lingers in the corners of *The Garden of Earthly Delights*; the turn-of-the-century Austrian architect who famously decried the ornate style of Art Nouveau, stating, "the evolution of culture is synonymous with the removal of ornament from utilitarian objects."<sup>9</sup> Loos' equation of streamlined design and evolved society leaves the ornate in the world of the so-called 'primitive': a realm where our relationships to inanimate things are supposedly irrational, excessive, fuelled with superstition and over-identification. Yet as Ortiz-Apuy's work makes clear, these forms of attachment ring true in all forms of design, ornate or sleek, contemporary or not. I feel a slight shiver as hands peel the protective film off the smooth black screen of an untouched iPhone 7 (YouTube views: 7,146,989), and it's difficult to locate where the purely commercial interest in a new product ends and something visceral takes over.

*"Junkspace is additive, layered, and lightweight, not articulated in different parts but subdivided, quartered the way a carcass is torn apart—individual chunks severed from a universal condition."*<sup>10</sup>

Working through *The Garden of Earthly Delights*, I have one last lingering thought. In Ortiz-Apuy's accumulation of YouTube videos, there's footage of someone "unboxing" a baby bird from its egg with a toothpick. It hits at a uniquely uncanny moment of audio/visual affinity: just as the Apple Watch unboxer is speaking of his prize as a "delicacy," an additional pair of hands are taking apart a fairly innocuous-looking egg-like product, which is in fact, a Japanese masturbation aid. It's perhaps the perfect constellation of the unboxing phenomenon in its entirety: textures luxe and smooth, squishy-sexual, soothing, vulnerable, maybe even violent. These dynamics play across Ortiz-Apuy's collages as well: body parts that are magazine-glossy yet fractured, suggestive of both desire and violence (perhaps capitalism's favourite twin impulses). Throughout the gallery, this Boschian landscape retains the dense, strange, and sometimes cruel pleasures of its predecessor. There are just some new layers to unpack.

1 Rem Koolhaas, "Junkspace," *October*, Vol. 100 (Spring 2002): 177.

2 Ibid., 176.

3 Ibid., 183.

4 Ibid., 175.

5 Mireille Silcoff, "A Mother's Journey Through the Unnerving Universe of Unboxing Videos," *The New York Times*, August 15, 2014:

<http://www.nytimes.com/2014/08/17/magazine/a-mothers-journey-through-the-unnerving-universe-of-unboxing-videos.html>

6 Koolhaas, 175-76.

7 Silcoff, *The New York Times*.

8 "Autonomous Sensory Meridian Response (ASMR)", or autonomous sensory meridian response, is a tingling, massage-like sensation triggered in some by certain audio-visual stimuli, such as whispering. A massive online community has grown around ASMR, featuring videos of people whispering or producing soft sounds in order to induce these feelings.

9 Quoted in Hal Foster, *Design and Crime: and Other Diatribes* (London: Verso, 2002): 14.

10 Koolhaas, 176.

### Cover Image

Juan Ortiz-Apuy, *The Garden of Earthly Delights Series*, hand-cut collage on foam board, 97 x 50 inch, 2016

### Poster Image

Juan Ortiz-Apuy, *The Garden of Earthly Delights Series*, hand-cut collage on foam board, 97 x 50 inch, 2016

### Image Right

Juan Ortiz-Apuy, *Unboxing*, digital video (16:40), 2016



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**Juan Ortiz-Apuy** was born in Costa Rica in 1980 and lives and works in Montréal. His work has been exhibited across Canada and internationally. Recent exhibitions include The MacLaren Arts Centre, SPROBOLE Contemporary Art Centre, Gallery Birch Libralato, ARTSPACE, Eastern Edge, A Space Gallery and Quebec City Biennial: Manif d'Art 7. In 2011 he was the recipient of the Halifax Regional Municipality Contemporary Visual Art Award. Ortiz-Apuy has a BFA from Concordia University, Montréal (2008), a Post-graduate Diploma from the Glasgow School of Art, Scotland (2009), and a MFA from NSCAD University, Halifax (2011). He recently completed a residency at the Vermont Studio Center, USA and has an upcoming exhibition at Museum London. Ortiz-Apuy is represented by Galerie Antoine Ertaskiran.

**Daniella Sanader** is a writer who lives in Toronto. In her work, she regularly explores associative and speculative modes for thinking and writing about contemporary art, ones that emphasize queer/feminist frameworks, messy feelings, and embodied experience. She holds an MA in Art History from McGill University, and has written essays and reviews for Canadian Art, C Magazine, Susan Hobbs Gallery, BlackFlash, Forest City Gallery, and many others. She has curated projects for Vtape and Oakville Galleries, and currently works at Gallery TPW in Toronto.

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