

# Carlos León

## *The Order of First Things*

CENTRO GALEGO DE ARTE CONTEMPORÁNEA  
Santiago de Compostela

Curated by Ángel Cerviño and Alberto González-Alegre

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From 31st October 2014 to 1st March 2015  
Hall, Ground floor and Double Space

# Carlos León

## *The Order of First Things*

### CARLOS LEÓN. APOLLO AND DIONYSUS TAKE TURNS IN DELPHI

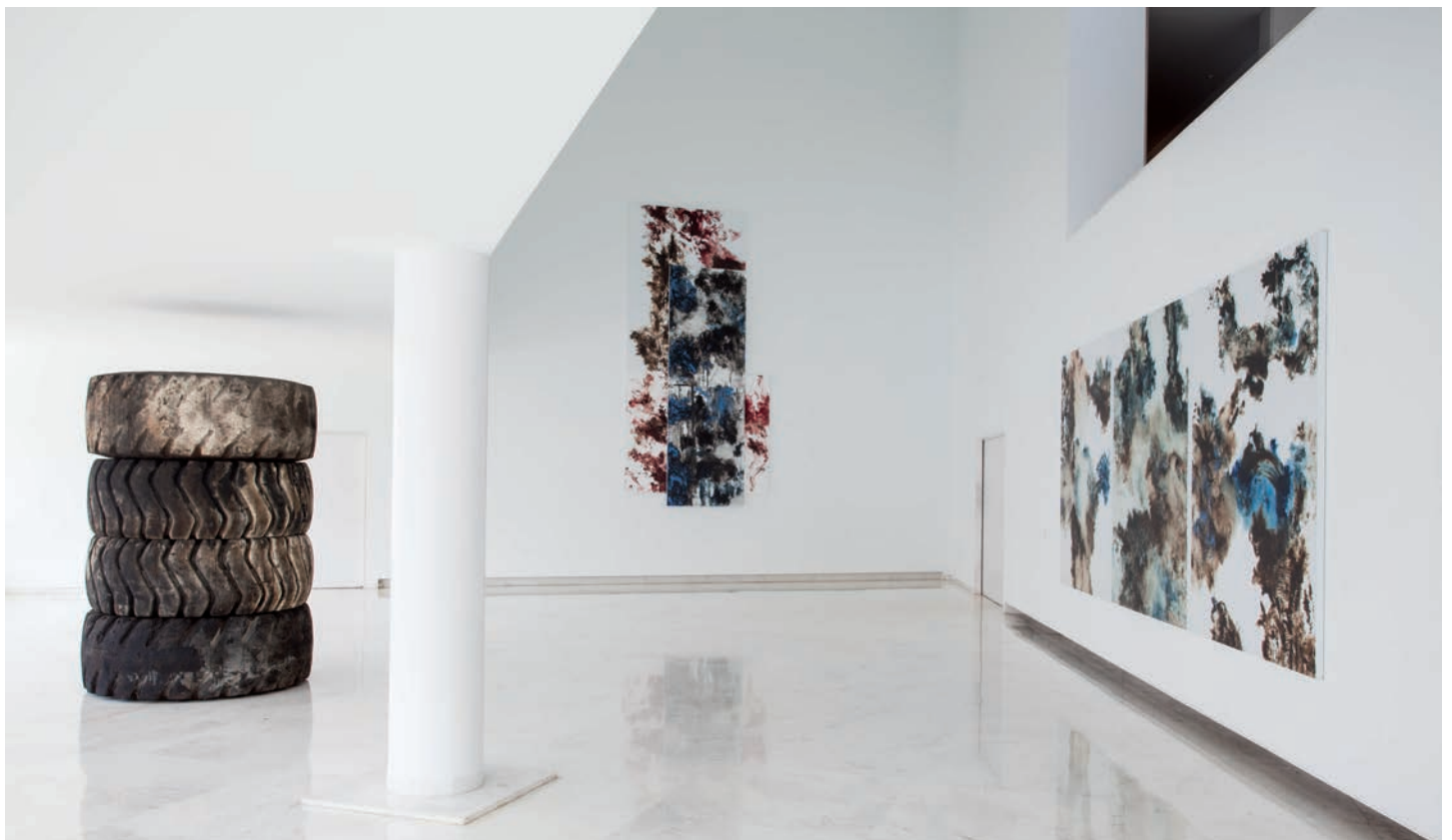
I wonder if I am not talking  
yet again about myself.  
Shall I be incapable, to the end,  
of lying on any other subject?  
[Samuel Beckett, *Malone Dies*]

Apollo and Dionysus take turns in Delphi, the Sybil's ravings keeping time with the metrics of the chant. Carlos León has often referred to the Dionysian impulse of his painting as an intoxicating force of metamorphosis and dissolution, an entropic hurricane which ravishes the surface of the picture; the unbridled vagrancy of forms that has scarcely been restated (given feedback) by its own procedures: for years he has been daubing the paint directly onto the canvas, tensing the strokes with his entire body, somewhere between the shadowy and the resplendent, combining both hand

and breath. His painting possesses a rhythmic effervescence which replicates both the physical agitation of the material as well as the weft of subtle tones of thought.

Each rhythm inevitably establishes its own guidelines, and it is the very development thereof which invokes the structure: demanding the caress of the pattern. Thus, from this maelstrom which, unrelenting, lays bare its core and reveals its inner workings, Carlos León can state his love of geometry: 'I find geometry fascinating. In part because it seems to contain the encoded language of the architecture of the universe. And also owing to what I usually call its dark aspect, its Pythagorean dimension, its mystique. The presence of the geometric in much of my work, from different periods and times, derives from this fascination. Indeed, either in a perfectly visible form or in a veiled manner, geometry and measurement are present in each and every one of my works, both pictorial and three dimensional.'

In his later work, this superlative painter ('one of the last delicate painters' as Fernando Castro labelled him) seems to have blended the cerebral rigour of his early years—those geometric works painted in Paris under the radical tenets of the Supports/Surfaces group and the conceptual and linguistic strategies encouraged by the debates throughout the seventies in the journal, *Tel Quel*—with the transparency and stark lyricism of his most *American* works, painted in the years ensuing long stays in New York: unctuous layers of material, glazings and transparencies with a weightless eroticism lighting up all the tones: violent fleshes, rosy ochres, rusted reds, livid blues. Thus was forged this pictorial offering, which has for years has been emerging as one of the fundamental plastic projects for understanding the process of rupture which,



Carlos León. *The Order of First Things*, exhibition view, CGAC, 2014-2015. © VEGAP, Santiago de Compostela, 2014



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operating from the very core of painting, shifted its pictorial practices towards a conscious breakdown in the regime of visibility, opening them up to the empty space of an expressiveness that has lost the subject of its requirements and which outlines—on the desolate plane on which the painting has coalesced—the faces of that joyous yet daunting search.

One of the most recent results of this auspicious conjunction is the appearance, over the last few years, of a powerful series of sculptural works in which purely object-based approaches, revolving around the poetics of the *objet trouvé*, coexist with strategies more akin to installations and assemblages. Carlos León's interest in the fragmentary, the broken, the displaced and the dysfunctional is deep rooted: 'the manipulation of objects, either as a mere game of assemblages or unions, or with an intentionality aimed more or less at what we could call the sculptural, is present in all the irrational activities to which I have devoted my time and efforts ever since I have been aware of my acts. My favourite toys, those which kept me rapt for hours on end, were never objects from toy shops, but the results of magpie-like wanderings through attics, cupboards, trunks and tool rooms.'

An inclination which, for years and in any part of the world, has led him to scour mountains of scrap and tonnes of industrial waste, in search of some sort of message intended solely for him: an encrypted transmission, hidden in a rusty grail, dented,

crushed, torn and destroyed by the elements, in which perhaps he may find answers to questions he has not yet managed to formulate. A grail which, in a previous earthly incarnation, could have been a mangled component from a loading auger or a multi-tonne tunnel boring machine. Because, for Carlos León, 'scrap is like writing, the legible part of a complex language. And one could say that the function of the artist using it is, first and foremost, that of inscribing that language in the general discourse of ideas; that of using it into the most specific aspect of aesthetic reflection and setting it within the realm of the surrounding artistic production.'

Scrap is a forgotten, broken language that the artist translates for us into the more legible code of artistic practices and objects meticulously prepared for exhibition; these items of waste speak to us, recounting their histories and those of the vain yearnings of the men who conceived, constructed, used and spoiled them. Carlos León takes these industrial remnants—fragments of poems, metric shavings conserved in fragile dismembered papyri buried beneath the sands of the desert—and with these discovered vocables he composes his own verses to discover, inevitably, as Tristan Tzara wisely warned us in his 'instructions for writing a Dadaist poem,' that the resulting collage will be an accurate depiction of the perplexities of his true face.

This exhibition, *The Order of First Things*, explores and lends structure to some of the most recent series from the painter, Carlos

León (Ceuta, Spain, 1948), probing, with particular interest, the set of relationships, both plastic and conceptual, that are established between the radical questioning of all illusionism that his painting proposes and the now consolidated practice of three-dimensional production, with clear constructivist roots, which conceives industrial detritus as the elementary particles of his rigorous architecture. A musical ordering of opposites, to which the title also alludes, in the words of the poet, Robert Duncan, *The Order of First Things*.

Ángel Cerviño and Alberto González-Alegre

## TO DO IT (AGAINST ALL THE ODDS)

We know what transmutation or transvaluation means for Nietzsche: not a change of values, but a change in the element from which the value of values derives. Appreciation instead of depreciation, affirmation as will to power.

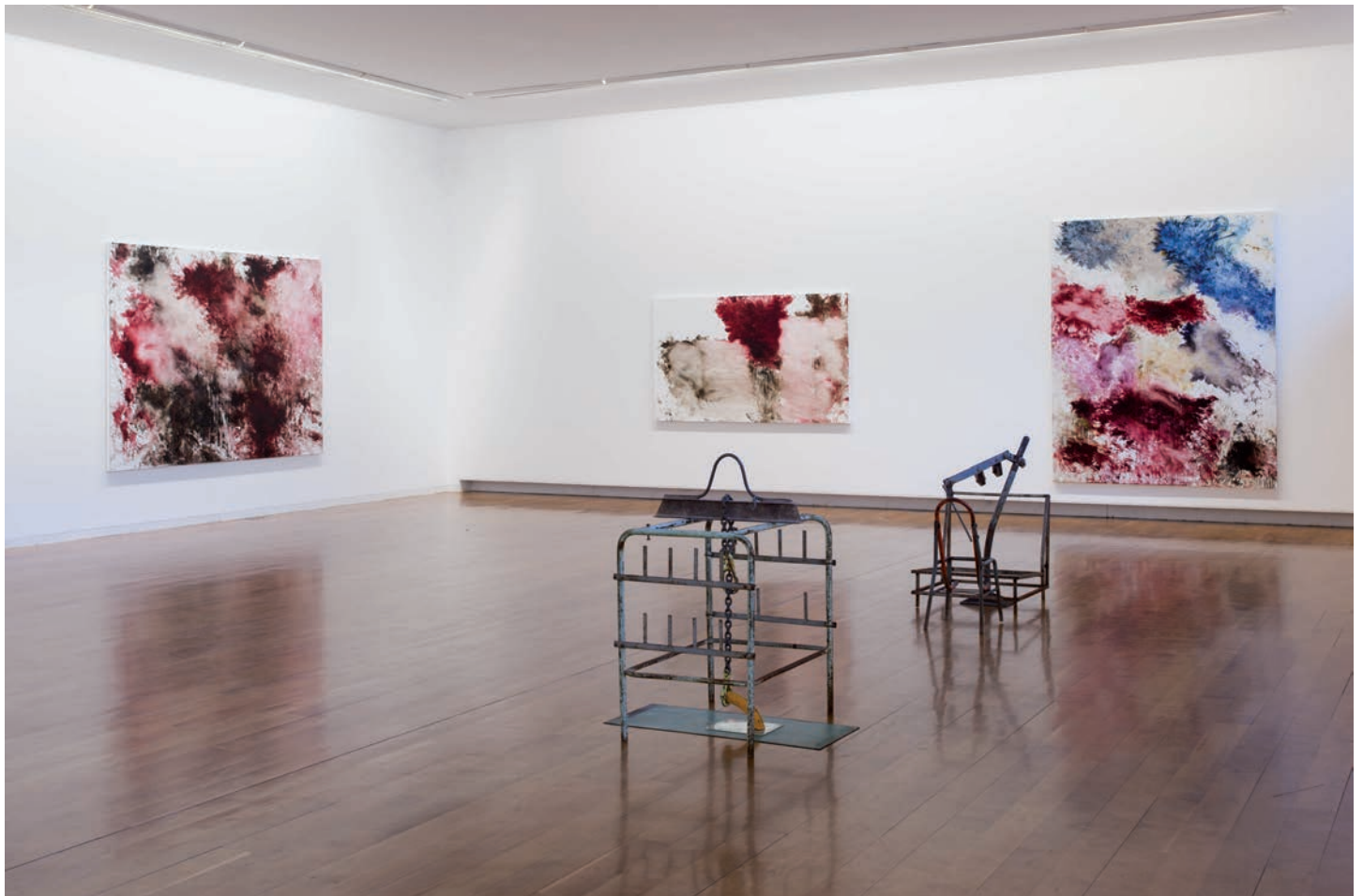
[Gilles Deleuze, *Nietzsche and Philosophy*]

I frequent scrap yards, those disconcerting landscapes where enormous amounts of metallic waste, originating from a wide range of industries, seem to be awaiting a sort of final judgement to put an end, once and for all, to their frantic existences. Observing their sheer quantity, I imagine how part of them could be fed into the inferno of smelting in blast furnaces, or how another part could reach the orthopaedic

purgatory of still possible recycling, and I also wonder what paradise must be like for these steels whose very existence took place between obediences, virtues and sacrifices which would have rendered them deserving of a higher ultimate fate, up there in the heavens.

Time and time again, I come back, happily clambering over these heaps. I love them, covered in that sort of unnatural light arising from the cycle of successive washings and rusting is to which time and weather have subjected them to.... I enjoy gazing at the heaps of rust, the hard beauty and the fleeting location of each fragment scattered about there. And I also feel a certain melancholy in the presence of certain objects which, after having ceased to fulfil the function for which they were created, have had to deal with the full repertoire of violence and injuries that a metal is capable of experiencing—cutting, twisting, denting, crushing, tearing, stretching, folding, chafing, dragging, weathering, expanding—and it doesn't escape me that perhaps I find myself projecting upon all of this some type of reference identifiable in terms of my own existence.

The industrial waste reaches the studio bearing its history, laden with imprints that speak of its past and of its relationship with reality. The reading of its forms and the exploration of its wounds transform the artist availing himself of them into a sort of forensic examiner, minor historian and, above all, novice economist, as it has been the dynamics of the economy which



Carlos León. *The Order of First Things*, exhibition view, CGAC, 2014-2015. © VEGAP, Santiago de Compostela, 2014



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have determined the series of incarnations, of all types, which have gradually etched their painful biographies and stamped the aforesaid imprints on them.

Scrap is a type of script, the legible part of a complex language. And one could say that the function of the artist using it is, first and foremost, that of incorporating this language into the general discourse of ideas, that of amalgamating it into the most specific aspect of aesthetic reflection and locating it within the surrounding realm of artistic production.

'Eternity is in love with the productions of time,' we hear William Blake say, to then hear Nietzsche add, in *The Birth of Tragedy*: 'Here, at this moment of supreme danger full will, art approaches as a saving severe less with the power to heal: art alone can redirect those reports of thoughts about the terrible or absurd nature of existence into representations which man can live: these representations are the sublime.'

While strolling among the heaps of scrap, bearing in mind what some artists have succeed in doing with it, the echo of these words are filled with meaning, since it is here in this transition from nausea to the sublime, in this transformation which Georges Bataille called 'the art of turning black anguish into light,' where one finds the *raison d'être* of their work: in the Dionysian affirmation, which constitutes the prime purpose of their devotion, in the line of hedonistic force, in the search for the transformational Hapax Legomenon. At night, Zarathustra liked to look into 'the

face of sleeping things.' The silent, still pieces iron of that one contemplates and loves so much, also seem to slumber... and have faces. Their internal geometry, the encoded order which still pervades them and renders them worthy of our attention, seems to contain, in the words of Michel Onfray, 'an algebra of pleasures which allows itself to be instructed by the cursed parts.'

The reflection that any artist immersed in the contemplation of these materials will analyse them in relation to the work of all the artists or movements known to him is virtually inevitable. Thus he will find that there is scrap of an expressionist nature, or of minimal aesthetics, or of a clearly pop bent, or of a patent social realism... and this will enable him to select and extract, from among so much deposited wreckage, those elements which best suit the formal and conceptual objectives which at that moment captures his attention and which may best serve to fuel his inspiration.

Fragment of the text by Carlos León to be included in the catalogue of the exhibition *The Order of First Things* (CGAC, Santiago de Compostela, 31 October 2014 - 1 March 2015).

**CGAC**

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