

Art in America

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REVIEWS SEPT. 01, 2017

Raphael Montañez Ortiz

LOS ANGELES,
at LAXART

by [Travis Diehl](#)

View of Raphael Montañez Ortiz's performance *The Ritual Piano Destruction Concert*, 2017, with Phil Wagner, at LAXART.



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A ring of kosher salt surrounded the dramatically lit wreck of a baby grand piano, suggesting a sacred barrier not to be crossed. Gashes on the keyboard evinced the blows of an axe; black keys had been knocked off. Here and there among the splintered veneer and slack wires lay sledgehammers and hatchets—the implements of the destruction—their handles wrapped in bright red tape. Since pioneering “destruction art” in the 1960s, Raphael Montañez Ortiz has decimated dozens of pianos, repeatedly enacting blunt trauma on this symbol of the taut harmonies of Western culture. His most recent such performance occurred amid LAXART’s short summary of his career. Like many songs of the ’60s, Ortiz’s piano demolition still turns out a crowd but—although once vigorous and shocking, with its suggestion of smashing the system—has been repeated to the point of becoming an almost melancholic ritual.

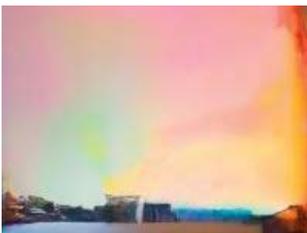
The wrecked piano was the most sensational work in the LAXART exhibition. Ortiz’s videos of the 1980s are less known but similarly dogged in their composition. The artist reedited short clips of classic films by stuttering the playback of Laserdiscs with a joystick and recording the results to tape. This, too, is a blunt technique—and one superficially echoed today by animated GIFs. But unlike their looping contemporary counterparts, which confine narratives in tight circles, Ortiz’s works seem to tangle storylines into knots. In *What Is This* (1985), the rhythmic, repetitive edit slowly reveals the gesture of a girl reaching for a bomb inexplicably resting on an end table in an upper-middle-class living room. “What is this?” she asks, over and

over, gripping and regripping the device. Mom glances up from her knitting as the bomb rolls off and on and off the table, hits the floor, and hiccups into flames.

Ortiz relishes disastrous combinations—Hollywood tropes and avant-garde techniques, for instance, or piano and axe. The methods combine in the earliest work on view, *Cowboy and “Indian” Film* (1957–58). To make this piece, Ortiz chopped up a reel of a Hollywood Western with a tomahawk, then pulled the pieces from a bag at random and spliced them together however they emerged—upside down, sideways, reversed—all the while chanting, as he puts it in the film’s title card, a “‘native American’ ‘war cry.’” The soundtrack’s gunshots, orchestral swells, and horses’ hooves clatter into chaos. The mulched and sutured footage manages to tell a story anyway: that of a violent film made by a violent culture.

By combining charged symbols, Ortiz composes tense harmonies that are always one slip away from dissonance. Two vinyl banners bearing digital paintings, *Christ-Eve* (2002) and *Kabbalah Zemi* (2001), hung in alcoves. The compositions are divided into quadrants resembling warping hallways running into dead ends. Printed in contrasting colors on the “walls” of the hallways—red on green, orange on blue—are idols, symbols, and texts drawn from disparate cultures. Hebrew letters are adjacent to Aztec symbols, and excerpts from scientific texts are paired with passages from the New Testament. The banners embody the balance of shamanic flair and intellectual calculation evident throughout Ortiz’s work, always staggering back and forth between ritual and interpretation.

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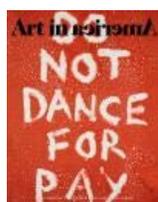
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