

Juan Muñoz *Seven Rooms*

Curated by Vicente Todolí

February 24–April 9, 2022
537 West 20th Street, New York



Juan Muñoz, *The Wasteland*, 1986, installed in *Juan Muñoz: Double Bind & Around*, Pirelli HangarBicocca, Milan, 2015. © Juan Muñoz Estate/VEGAP, Madrid. Photo by Attilio Maranzano. Courtesy Juan Muñoz Estate and David Zwirner

Sculpture is space by negation. When placed in the right space, it takes over the powers that already existed there and joins them. —Juan Muñoz

David Zwirner is pleased to present an exhibition of work by the Spanish artist Juan Muñoz curated by Vicente Todolí. Spanning two floors of the gallery's 537 West 20th Street location in New York, the presentation will feature seven discrete installations from throughout Muñoz's career that highlight his expansive notion of sculpture. Wide-ranging in scale and format, each installation provides viewers with a distinct experience. This will be the gallery's first exhibition of the artist's work since announcing the representation of the Juan Muñoz Estate in 2020.

Among the most significant artists to rise to international prominence in the mid-1980s and 1990s, Muñoz sought to foreground the relationship between the art object, architectural space, and the viewer in his formally and conceptually inventive work. Until his untimely death at the age of forty-eight, he produced an extensive, powerfully evocative body of work that includes not only sculptures and installations but also drawings, writings, sound works, theater pieces, and curatorial projects that uniquely explore the narrative and philosophical possibilities of art. As Todolí notes, "Juan Muñoz was an artist who, when confronted with a problem, would find a solution, a way out, and then look for a new

problem, taking nothing for granted. He was always looking to make trouble, for a new way of looking at things.”

The works on view bring together art-historical, literary, and theatrical references, while seeming to exist apart from time and space. Presented in the first room, *The Wasteland* (1986) is one of Muñoz's earliest installations and the first to incorporate the entirety of the gallery, physically enveloping the viewer within the work itself. A tessellated optical floor spans the space from edge to edge, at once evocative of Francesco Borromini's baroque interiors and use of forced perspective as well as Carl Andre's systematically constructed sculptures, intended for the viewer to walk on. At one end, a bronze dummy—a recurrent motif in Muñoz's work—looks back at the viewer. Absent his ventriloquist, the figure is rendered silent, merely hinting at the possibility of sound. The work's title refers to the 1922 T. S. Eliot poem of the same name, considered a classic of modernist literature and significant for its theatrical address and weaving together of present-day observations with history and myth to decry a barren landscape.

In contrast, the late work *Four Piggybacks with knives* (2001) in the second room at first glance resembles classical figurative sculpture. Like his contemporaries Thomas Schütte, Robert Gober, and Katharina Fritsch, Muñoz returned to the figure, and the possibility of narrative, at a time when it was very much out of vogue in the broader art world. Here, his smiling doppelgängers are engaged in a mysterious dynamic. Four men dressed in suits carry four others by piggyback—their clothing drapes fluidly, belying the work's bronze construction and recalling classical Greek sculpture. Each of the figures held aloft languidly wields a pocketknife in hand—a recurrent motif in Muñoz's work. It is unclear who is aggressing upon whom (if anyone at all) as they circle each other, highlighting the thin distinction between pleasure and pain, play and danger, pursuer and pursued. Their tragicomic setup derives in part from Goya's satirical allegories of nineteenth-century Spanish society, particularly evident in his late drawings.

Schwelle (Threshold) (1991), on view in the third room, features a set of towering columns comprising stacked terracotta blocks with a bronze figure nested within them. The columns are spread across the width of the room, delineating a space-within-a-space and creating a boundary (or threshold) between the viewer and the sculptural field. Originally designed to fit the domestically scaled Museum Haus Lange in Krefeld, Germany, in subsequent installations the columns have stopped short of the height of the room, seeming to hold the weight of nothing at all. Though the columns evoke the minimalist ethos of utilizing industrial materials, Muñoz challenges that paradigm by imbuing the installation with a psychological dimension, hand-making the terracotta blocks and including a human figure, in this case a dwarf, who stands sentinel amongst the pillars, gazing straight ahead. Referencing the unique position of proximity and influence that dwarfs held in seventeenth- and eighteenth-century European courts as the only individuals allowed to levy criticism, Muñoz was influenced in particular by the paintings of Spanish master Diego Velázquez as well as the personal story of the rococo architect François de Cuvilliés, which convey the historical position of these figures.

In the fourth room, three figures are suspended in the air, hanging acrobatically in space. Based on Edgar Degas's 1879 masterwork *Miss La La at the Cirque Fernando*, in which a performer depicted from below hangs only by a rope held in her teeth, Muñoz's figures conjure a range of associations. By positioning them skyward, Muñoz again borrows from Borromini, inciting viewers to look up as they traverse the gallery. Though constantly in motion, spinning gently on their axis, the figures remain rooted to a single spot, ambiguously straddling the line between illusion and danger.

On the gallery's second floor, Muñoz's *Conversation Piece* (2001) features five figures composed of nondescript human heads and torsos and a rounded bottom. One of Muñoz's most sustained bodies of work, the *Conversation Pieces* were first devised in 1991. He continued to work on them until his death, creating new groupings and inserting them into a range of situations both indoors and out. Following the example of Alberto Giacometti, whom he greatly admired, Muñoz purposefully designed these works to be nonnaturalistic so as to divest them of any perceived associations, allowing him to create psychologically charged tableaux. Captured as if in motion, the figures remain static, rooted to the ground, lacking the possibility of movement. The absence of sound again figures heavily as the individual elements—as their title suggests—seem to be engaged in a dialogue without words, left open for the viewer to imagine.

A suite of thirteen works on paper from 1992 that depict scenes from Joseph Conrad's 1896 short story "An Outpost of Progress," considered the progenitor to his seminal *Heart of Darkness* (1899), highlights Muñoz's facility as a draftsman. For the artist, drawing was an autonomous and parallel practice to his three-dimensional works. Utilizing a range of techniques, Muñoz presents these scenes as black-and-white vignettes, some lightly sketched and some richly rendered, arranging them in a format reminiscent of comic strips. Viewed together, the thirteen drawings form an installation unto themselves.

Finally, *Stuttering Piece* (1993) represents a drastic shift in scale, requiring an intimate, one-on-one engagement. Two miniature seated figures, only inches tall, are nestled in the corner of the gallery and dramatically spotlighted. An audio track repeats a circuitous and enigmatic conversation: "What did you say? / I didn't say anything. / You never say anything. No. But you keep coming back to it." Inspired by Muñoz's interest in Samuel Beckett's existential dramas, the work both loops endlessly and never seems to be complete.

Spanning the entirety of his career, these seven installations provide an overview of many of the recurrent themes and motifs of the artist's work, as well as demonstrate his sustained engagement with the human figure in various forms. As Muñoz noted, "I build these works to explain to myself things that I cannot understand otherwise."¹

A fully illustrated catalogue is forthcoming from David Zwirner Books, with new scholarship on the artist's work.

Juan Muñoz (1953–2001) was born in Madrid. He spent a year studying architecture at the Polytechnic University in Madrid before deciding to flee fascist Spain for London in 1970. Muñoz went on to study at the Central School of Art and Design, London (1976–1977); Croydon College of Design and Technology, London, where he focused on printmaking (1979–1980); and Pratt Graphics Center, New York (1981). The periods Muñoz spent living in London and New York were particularly formative. While in London, his work was primarily performance-based, yet he progressively grew interested in a group of artists who were working to move beyond the canon of traditional sculpture, including Richard Deacon and Bill Woodrow, among others. After being awarded a prestigious Fulbright Fellowship, he briefly moved to New York in 1981. He also began his work in sculpture and was strongly influenced by Philip Guston, Robert Morris, Barnett Newman, and Robert Smithson. Muñoz developed a friendship with the Spanish

¹ Cited in Lynne Cooke, "Juan Muñoz: Interpolations," in *Juan Muñoz* (New York: Dia Center for the Arts, 1999), p. 2.

curator Carmen Giménez, who introduced Muñoz to the influential sculptor Richard Serra. Muñoz returned to Spain the following year and devoted a year to curating, during which time he organized with Giménez the exhibition *Correspondences: 5 Architects, 5 Sculptors*, which included work by Serra, at the Palacio de las Alhajas, Madrid.

Following his inclusion in notable group shows, including the 1986 Venice Biennale, in 1987 the artist had his first solo museum show, *Juan Muñoz: Sculptures de 1985 à 1987*, at the CAPC Musée d'Art Contemporain, Bordeaux, and his first solo museum presentation in the United States took place at The Renaissance Society at the University of Chicago in 1990. These early exhibitions established Muñoz as a key figure in bringing figurative language back to sculpture, alongside his friends and fellow artists Robert Gober and Thomas Schütte. Muñoz's work has been the subject of numerous solo presentations throughout the United States and Europe, including at the Institut Valencià d'Art Modern (IVAM), Valencia, Spain (1992), and the Irish Museum of Modern Art, Dublin (1994). Two significant solo exhibitions of his work took place in 1996: *Juan Muñoz: monólogos y diálogos* at Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofía, Madrid (traveled to Museum für Gegenwartskunst, Zurich, in 1997), and *Juan Muñoz: A Place Called Abroad* at Dia Center for the Arts, New York (traveled as *Streetwise* to SITE Santa Fe, New Mexico, in 1998). The artist's work was the subject of a solo presentation at the Louisiana Museum of Modern Art, Humlebæk, Denmark, in 2000. That same year he also was commissioned by Tate Modern, London, to be the second artist—the first being Louise Bourgeois—to take over its Turbine Hall. Muñoz spent months developing a major installation, which opened to the public in 2001.

Also in 2001 to 2002, the Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden, Washington, DC, presented a midcareer survey of Muñoz's work that subsequently traveled to The Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles (2002); Art Institute of Chicago (2002); and the Contemporary Arts Museum, Houston (2003). K21 Kunstsammlung Nordrhein-Westfalen, Düsseldorf, presented *Juan Muñoz – Rooms of my mind* in 2006 to 2007, and Musée de Grenoble, France, presented *Juan Muñoz: Sculptures et dessins* in 2007. A major museum retrospective devoted to Muñoz's work opened at Tate Modern, London, the following year. The show traveled through 2009 to the Guggenheim Museum Bilbao; Museu de Arte Contemporânea de Serralves, Porto; and Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofía, Madrid. Additional notable solo shows have been held at the Clark Art Institute, Williamstown, Massachusetts (2010); Pirelli HangarBicocca, Milan (2015); and the Art Institute of Chicago (2016). In 2018, Muñoz's work was the subject of a solo exhibition at the Skulpturenhalle of the Thomas Schütte Stiftung in Neuss, Germany.

In 2017, PLANTA, the project space developed by Sorigué and Fundació Sorigué and located in Lleida, Spain, installed the artist's major work *Double Bind*, which was created in 2001 for the Turbine Hall at Tate Modern, London. The installation is on long-term view.

Opening in June 2022, *Juan Muñoz: Drawings 1988–2000*, curated by Dieter Schwarz, will be on view at Centro Botín, Santander, Spain.

Muñoz's work has been featured in a number of significant international group exhibitions, including the Venice Biennale (1986, 1993, and 1997) and Documenta (1992 and 2002). In 2000, he was awarded the Premio Nacional de Artes Plásticas by the Spanish government.

During the artist's lifetime and for many years following his death, Muñoz was represented by Marian Goodman Gallery, where his work was the subject of numerous solo exhibitions in the gallery's New York

and Paris locations. The first took place in 1991, early in the artist's career, followed by solo shows in 1993, 1999, 2004, 2006, and 2014–2015.

The artist's work is represented in prominent public collections, including the Art Institute of Chicago; Carré d'Art – Musée d'art contemporain de Nîmes, France; Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden, Washington, DC; Institute of Contemporary Art, Boston; Louisiana Museum of Modern Art, Humlebæk, Denmark; M HKA, Museum of Contemporary Art Antwerp; Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofía, Madrid; Museu d'Art Contemporani de Barcelona; Museum Boijmans Van Beuningen, Rotterdam; The Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles; The Museum of Modern Art, New York; San Francisco Museum of Modern Art; Stedelijk Museum voor Actuele Kunst (S.M.A.K.), Ghent; and Tate, London.

Vicente Todolí was appointed artistic director of Pirelli HangarBicocca in May 2012, where he is responsible for the program. His career in the visual arts spans more than thirty years, and includes positions as chief curator (1986–1988) and then artistic director of the Institut Valencià d'Art Modern (IVAM) (1988–1996), before joining the Museu de Arte Contemporânea de Serralves as its founding director in 1996 until 2002. In 2002, he was appointed director of Tate Modern by the Trustees of the Tate Gallery, where he joined full-time in March 2003 and left in June 2010.

Currently, he advises various museums and foundations, including the Fundación Botín in Santander, where he serves as chair of the advisory board, and he is the sole adviser for Fundació Per Amor a l'Art in Valencia, and Inelcom collection in Madrid. In 2015, he curated the exhibition *Juan Muñoz: Double Bind & Around* at HangarBicocca. He is on the advisory board of the Juan Muñoz Estate and is working in cooperation with the estate to prepare a catalogue raisonné of works by the artist.

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