

Extracting extraordinary from mundane

By Kwon Mee-yoo
meeyoo@ktimes.co.kr

Damian Ortega's artwork — made of rocks, scrap metal and pieces of glass — has made the Kukje Gallery in Seoul look like a bizarre natural history museum.

"Reading Landscapes," which opened last week, is the Mexican artist's first solo exhibit in Korea and highlights his efforts to explore the artistic possibilities of mundane materials and deliver social commentary through them.

Entering the gallery, visitors first face a huge installation of stones and other objects hanging from wires, combining to form the shape of a planet split in half.

Ortega explains the work, "Viaje al Centro de la Tierra: Penetrable" (Journey to the Center of the Earth: Penetrable), is an expression of how the public consumes art in the 21st century. Contemporary art is evolving in a way where the boundaries between the artist and viewers are blurring, he claims, and this reverses the relationship between what is seen and who sees it.

"I am fascinated by the idea of recycling or the life of old objects continuing. It is interesting to see how things grow and develop in nature, like trees' growth rings," he said. "Even lines in a stone have millions of layers, full of information. This is an organic way of growing."



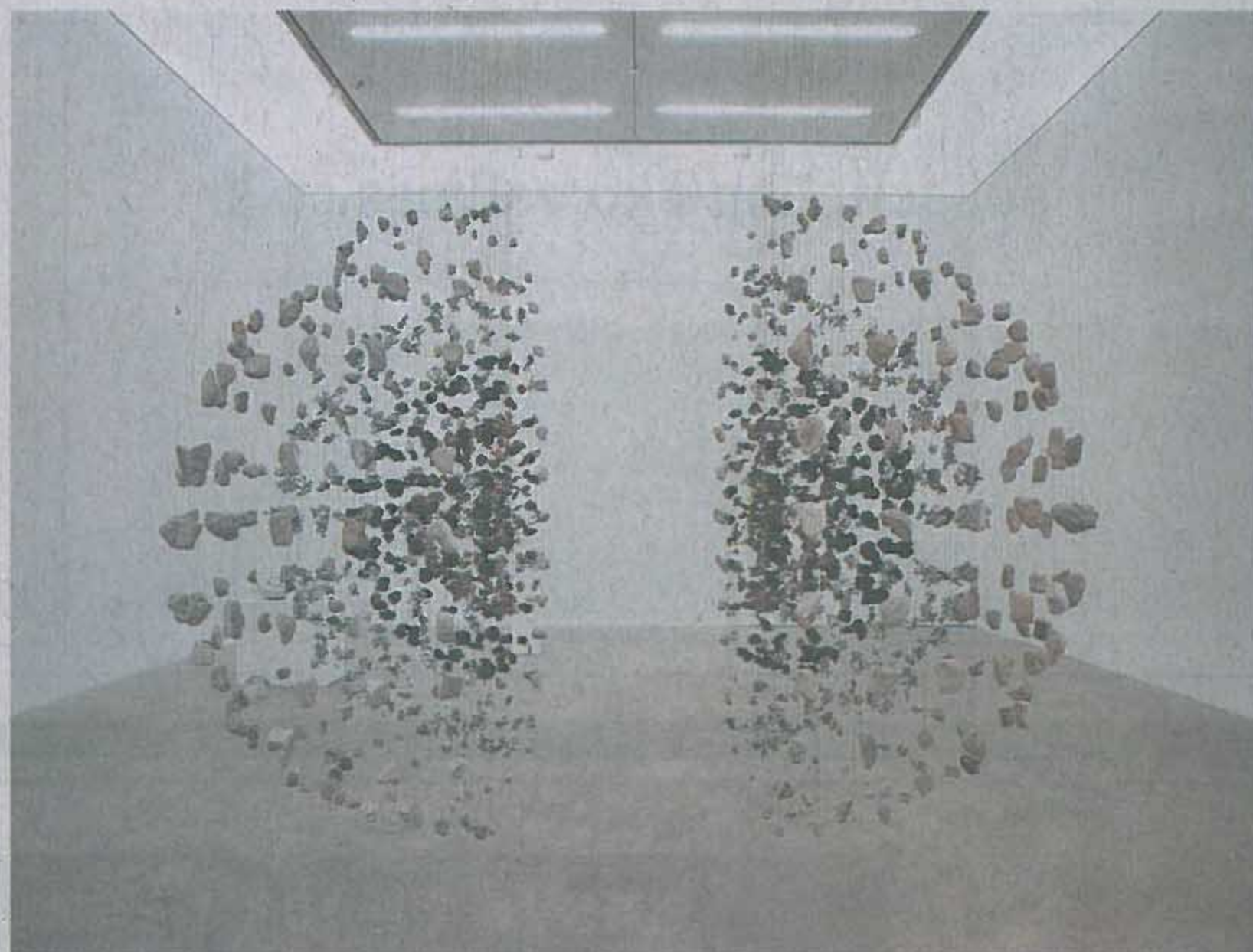
Damian Ortega

He is particularly interested in geological strata, which is reflected in his works such as "Falla" (Fault) and "Todas las Fallas" (All Faults).

Ortega also said that growing up in Mexico, a country in the midst of rapid industrialization, also influenced his works.

"Mexico is a country of never-ending construction. It is flexible, and people are open to changes," he said.

That might be why he uses many architectural materials for his works. "For me, it's just a material. I like them because they are not so figurative. It is also interesting to break the limits of the material," he said.



"Viaje al Centro de la Tierra: Penetrable" (Journey to the Center of the Earth: Penetrable)

Ortega began his career as a political cartoonist. He also worked with other young artists such as Abraham Cruzvillegas, and their workshops eventually developed into a new movement in the Mexican art scene.

"Now we have developed new schools in Mexican contemporary art and are established figures. I think the workshop grew well, providing infrastructure for the contemporary art culture in Mexico," Ortega said.

Some of his works are more light-hearted.

"Geoda 3: Cebolla" (Geode 3: Onion) is made of layers of paper

crumpled into balls. Ortega used receipts, documents and other paper objects he collected for a year. "It was important for me to do this with my hands," Ortega said of the artwork.

He also used envelopes to make the piece, in reference to a private joke he shares with his friend and fellow artist Yang Hae-gue, who also used envelopes to create geographic patterns in her "Trustworthies" collage series.

The exhibit runs through May 11. Admission is free. For more information, visit www.kukjegallery.com or call (02) 735-8449.