

Jonathon Atkinson

The forty-eight-year-old Mexican sculptor, “one of the most influential artists of this decade, and almost certainly the next,” Mexico’s best-known living artist, “a bricoleur par excellence,” stood and waited, naked, in the cream-colored vault of his impeccably appointed bathroom, his gut low-hanging and aswarm with white hair, testing the spray off the showerhead with one thick hand, the water still icy this evening, taking unusually long to warm up, his body mostly hirsute except where his clothing abraded him, for instance the chicken-skinned backs of his upper-arms; he an undeniably notable—at least a noteworthy—artist, the recipient of the Wolfgang Hahn Prize and a Guggenheim fellow, the fifth-youngest-ever MacArthur grantee, a man whose early rise to prominence made other meteoric rises appear measured, halting, but who now found himself, at home in Mexico City, experiencing some turbulence career-wise, the nature of which had until a few days earlier seemed unserious—had seemed, prior to the opening of his mid-career retrospective at MoMA, like a mere bump—but which now, given the nature of the critical reception to that show, appeared graver, the response having been, at best, “mixed,” occasionally positive but never more than mutedly so, never laudatory, for the most part distinctly unenthused and, in more than one case, revisionist, the show’s harshest critics taking pains to characterize the artist’s earlier champions as woefully misguided, with the most vociferous (Holland Cotter of the *New York Times*) describing the artist’s earlier shows as “barely there”—this middle-aged artist, curiously haired, stood alone in his truly resplendent, travertine-tiled bathroom, still waiting for the fucking water to warm up, increasingly miffed about its unchanging iciness, the disagreeability of which particularly rankled given the bathroom’s ideality, otherwise (the shower’s water pressure optimized, the floor tiles radiating heat), rubbing his wet palms together and griping to himself about the perpetual fly in the Vaseline, the rain on the picnic and/or the parade, all in English, he failed to note. Perched on the rim of the basin he stood before was a scum-patched rubber duck, all but flecks of its painted eyes and beak worn off, which belonged to his five-year-old son, an alarmingly skinny, stilted boy who lived with his mother in London for all but a few aching weeks every summer, when he came to stay here. The artist’s gaze listed over the duck but failed to register it, he being, at the moment, roundly oblivious—to the soft scrape of black branches against the opaque bathroom window, to the humming tone the wind blowing along the telephone wires caused, or really to anything else—the lights blinking off the twenty-four-hour dentist’s offices down the street, the forty-three still missing in Guerrero—his thoughts, as they put it up north, “somewhere else.” He relented now and, bracing himself, strode into the still-nippy stream, breathing and blinking against the shock of it, his nipples puckering and his thoughts slipping inexorably back to the disastrous few hours he’d spent just that afternoon with a writer from *The New Yorker*, who, he realized now, too late, and contrary to her positive appraisal of a show of his ten years prior, had been in total lockstep with Cotter, and who’d asked him, as they sat down together in his airy studio (or, as he preferred to call it, his “tool room”), to respond to Cotter’s contention that the artist’s sole, dubious accomplishment had been rendering “trash tasteful” (this coup de grace of Cotter’s coming at the end of a lengthy dissection in which he’d claimed the artist’s best-known works, his celebrated bricolage—for instance, his meticulous arrangements of shredded tires, collected from the freeways surrounding Mexico City—were in fact not noteworthy, had in fact only succeeded in rendering “the everyday artsy,” in effectuating beauty only in its most conventional, tiresome form without ever “becoming unmanageable or dangerous” or “proving unforgettable”)—this *New*

Yorker woman putting her question to the artist and then permitting a silence, admissible because tactful but still irksome, to emerge, in the face of which the artist had floundered and, unaccountably, reached for a reference to Proust, an author whose work, with the exception of the first thirty or so pages of *Swann’s Way*, he’d never read, claiming however there in his tool room before this unexpectedly frail woman (her hair white and luminous, her teeth the texture of shelled walnuts) that Proust had exerted a profound influence on his whole aesthetics, claiming, increasingly rapidly, that his program of “recycling junk” was finally, if understood properly, Proustian, registering as he said so that the journalist’s eyes had narrowed, her lips tensed, and so then attempting a lurching change in topic but not succeeding—the journalist stopping him to ask, baffled, *Hold on a second—Proust??*—after which he’d come clean, admitting he too was unsure what he’d meant, especially seeing as he’d never actually read *In Search of Lost Time*, conceding that it was a stupid comparison, on the whole (“Yes,” she’d said, otherwise silent, “Yes, it is”), and knowing instantly that this moment of unsuccessful fraudulence was all anyone would remember of the article now that this woman had found what she’d come looking for, the substantiation of Cotter’s attack, and knowing too, in the shower just beginning to warm, distantly but with all the assurance genuine knowledge required, that any evidence of his fraudulence scrounged up by anyone else could never exhaust the matter, that more examples would always be forthcoming so long as one wished to seek them out, and as he ducked now to rinse the Hawaiian white honey shampoo from his hair, the recessed lights silvering off the redox water as it sprayed, radii of steam beginning to bloom on the mirror and window, he felt a slight jolt at his right heel, which, on turning back and looking down, he saw owed to his son’s eyeless rubber duck, tipped off its perch and floated down to rest at his feet. And blinking down at it, the artist recalled how, on his last visit, his boy had begun laughing while bathing and had dunked the duck, filling it with soapy water to squirt out of the beak, with abandon, wetting the front of the artist’s t-shirt, giggling and splashing and—this the artist remembered clearest—singing, the boy’s voice high and wavering against the thunder of the drawing bath, his tone unbearably sweet, every birdlike bone in his tiny torso visible, it had seemed, which prompted the artist, then as now—blinking into the spray as it flickered white before the walls’ swirls of sea-glass—to remember himself at that age, so raw and un-processing, and how after kindergarten let out one afternoon he’d ran to his mother waiting curbside outside his school, sobbing, because he’d been cut, point-blank, from the kindergarten choir (how strange that they’d even *had* cuts, so early on—this the first time, almost certainly, he’d been cut from anything)—and how ruined he’d felt then, how collapsed, as his stern grizzled teacher had fingered her long necklace strung with crimson beads, confirming that Yes, he hadn’t misheard her, she was turning him away, he, a boy (like his boy) stammering and stiff, peering up at this muumued woman and reeling, the floor of his stomach having dropped away, since only then did he comprehend just how much he yearned to stand before a crowd, visible to all, and sing.

