

RUBEN OCHOA

MATRIX 169

CLOUDLESS DAY

JUNE 5 – SEPTEMBER 7, 2014

WADSWORTH ATHENEUM MUSEUM OF ART



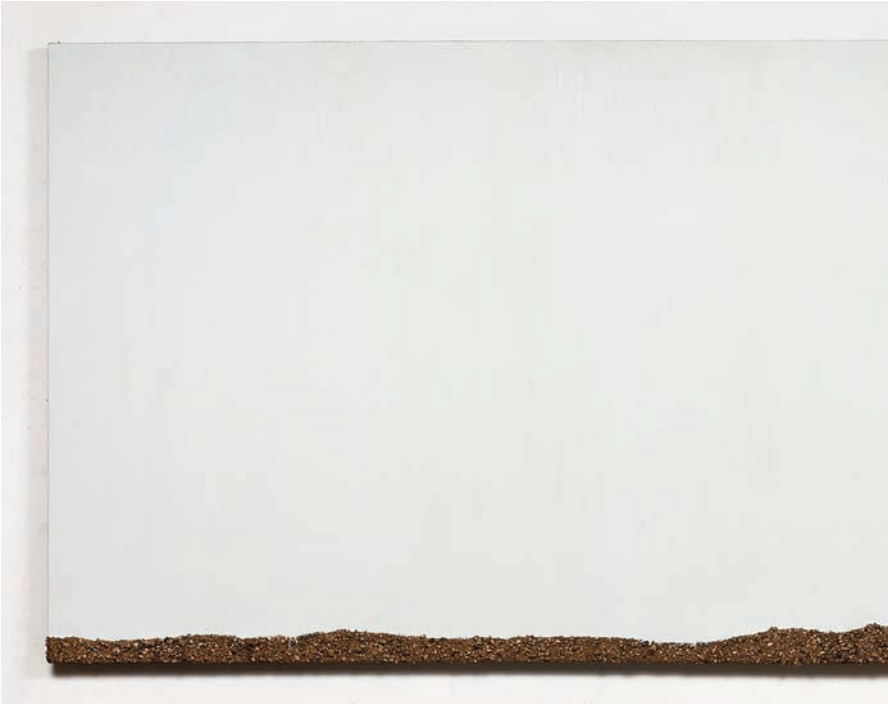
NOTHING BUT BLUE SKIES

A cloudless day evokes an image of clear, bright blue skies, and perhaps the landscape of the American West—the Big Sky Country of Montana and Wyoming or California's Mojave Desert, Yosemite Valley, Sierra Nevada Mountain Range, and the Monterey coastline. With the opening of the Transcontinental Railroad in 1869, the legendary vistas lured numerous artists westward to capture their magnificence. Thus, several schools of California landscape painting emerged at the turn of the twentieth century, with California Impressionism (or California Plein-Air School) among the most prominent. Influenced in style by French Impressionism and Post-Impressionism, the grand paintings of artists such as Guy Rose (1867-1925), William Wendt (1865-1946), and Francis Stilwell Dixon (1879-1967) featured bright palettes applied with loose, painterly brushwork. It is to this history and tradition that Los Angeles artist Ruben Ochoa responds.

In the exhibition *Cloudless Day*, Ochoa tackles the genre of California landscape painting, but with his own interpretation. The artist is best known for his monumental sculptural installations, which explore the urban landscape and are created from accessible construction and building materials including galvanized fence posts, concrete slabs, lengths of rebar, chain-link fence, pallets, and excavated dirt. Ochoa “deconstructs a construction worker aesthetic,”¹ seeking to nudge the viewer into reassessing his perception of the everyday environment. It serves as a gateway to issues on class and culture, and the working and merchant class; the virtually ignored population that keeps the machinations of large cities such as Los Angeles running and prospering. In that liminal space where Man and Nature collide, is an Ochoa artwork, as in this new series of landscape paintings in the exhibition *Cloudless Day*.

After more than a decade of exploring sculpture as a medium, Ochoa returns to his painting practice to create large-scale, mixed-media sculptural canvases that draw inspiration from California Impressionism, various contemporary art movements, and even diverse popular culture sources. Ochoa reduces his landscapes to two tones, representing earth and sky. For the blue skies, Ochoa turned to house paint—a medium famously used by abstract expressionist Franz Kline. In selecting the various tones, Ochoa was intrigued with the paint colors of lifestyle icon Martha Stewart because of their poetic names—Cloudless Day, Darkening Sky, Morning Fog, etc.—which could be appropriated for the titles of the paintings as well as the exhibition. Their names also refer to nature, and Ochoa relishes the irony that we paint our interior walls with colors that allude to the external environment. We build shelters to protect ourselves from the elements and yet paint our walls with colors that directly reflect the outside world.

RUBEN OCHOA, *MORNING FOG*, 2014.
ACRYLIC HOUSE PAINT AND DIRT ON CANVAS, 66 X 180 X 3 IN.
COURTESY OF THE ARTIST AND SUSANNE VIELMETTER
LOS ANGELES PROJECTS.
PHOTO CREDIT: ROBERT WEDEMEYER



FRANCIS STILWELL DIXON, AMERICAN, 1879-1967,
THE LEANING TREE, 1917. OIL ON CANVAS, 29 7/8 X 36 IN.
WADSWORTH ATHENEUM MUSEUM OF ART.
GIFT OF MRS. EDWARD W. HOOKER, 1917.3



RUBEN OCHOA, *...THAT'S WHAT SHE SAID*, 2010.
GALVANIZED POLE AND CONCRETE FOOTING, 8 FT. X 31 FT. X 18 IN.
COURTESY OF THE ARTIST AND SUSANNE VIELMETTER
LOS ANGELES PROJECTS.
PHOTO CREDIT: ROBERT WEDEMEYER



RUBEN OCHOA, *EXTRUDED MASSES*, 2013 (INSTALLATION VIEW).
DIRT, CONCRETE, EPS FOAM AND STEEL.
COURTESY OF THE ARTIST AND SUSANNE VIELMETTER
LOS ANGELES PROJECTS.
PHOTO CREDIT: ROBERT WEDEMEYER



CORY ARCANGEL, AMERICAN, BORN 1978. *SUPER MARIO CLOUDS*, 2002. (INSTALLATION VIEW, *SYNTHETIC*, WHITNEY MUSEUM OF AMERICAN ART, 2009.) HANDMADE HACKED SUPER MARIO BROS. CARTRIDGE AND NINTENDO NES VIDEO GAME SYSTEM. DIMENSIONS VARIABLE. COLLECTION: WHITNEY MUSEUM OF AMERICAN ART, NEW YORK; PURCHASE WITH FUNDS FROM THE PAINTING AND SCULPTURE COMMITTEE. © CORY ARCANGEL. IMAGE COURTESY OF CORY ARCANGEL AND TEAM GALLERY, NEW YORK

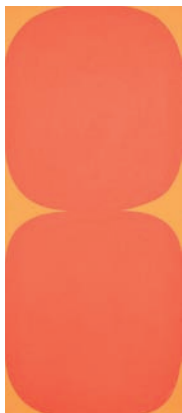
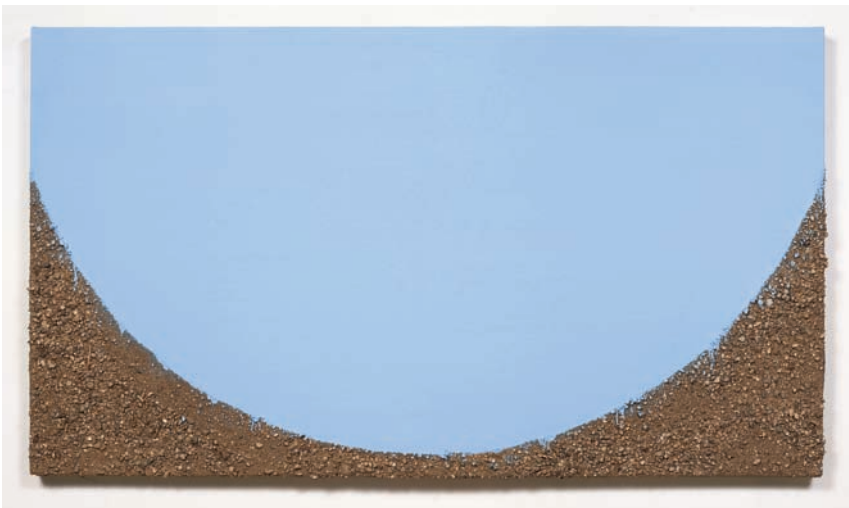
Ochoa's deceptively simple compositions juxtapose monochromatic skies with rugged, earthy terrains. Far from traditional formal or geometric abstractions, the flat, single-toned skies disclose texture in horizontal or vertical grooves created by applying the paint with a handheld broom or push broom. The landscapes are composed of dirt, specifically California dirt that is a mix of sand and gravel, the kind used as an aggregate for concrete. One of the artist's signature materials, it is a deliberate reference to the urban landscape of Los Angeles. This approach counters the tradition of the painted vistas that celebrate Nature's beauty and embodies "a continuation of Ochoa's interest in the poetic potential of vernacular materials and urban signifiers."² The rough dirt brings a three-dimensional, sculptural presence to the work, and the artist has enhanced this perception by using three-inch stretcher bars to increase the depth of the painting. The exaggerated, yet pared-down constructions simultaneously signify contradictory elements: nature and industry, representation and abstraction, content and formalism.

The three works bring to mind the movement known as Earthworks, also called Land Art, in which the landscape and art are intimately linked. In Ochoa's paintings, the landscape is created from nature, using California dirt. However, the paintings do not exist within a natural landscape like pure Land Art, exemplified by Robert Smithson's iconic earthwork sculpture *Spiral Jetty* (1970) on the Great Salt Lake in Utah. Instead, Ochoa's gravel functions as artistic gesture as much as a physical embodiment of the built landscape. The undulating, irregular, curved, and rising topography traverses each of the three horizontal canvases.

Morning Fog, the largest painting in the exhibition, features a huge sky and a minimal amount of land. This low horizon line and abundance of sky mimics the stripped-down, side-scrolling backgrounds of 8-bit graphic video games of the 1980s, such as the arcade video game *Moon Patrol* (1982), and Activision's *Pitfall!* (1982) for Atari. The early video game technology has become classic and is currently experiencing a renaissance in the platform of hand-held devices with games like *Minecraft* (2009) and *Hill Climb Racing* (2012).³ In fact, a number of contemporary artists make use of this dated video imagery as subject matter. Among them is Cory Arcangel whose *Super Mario Clouds* (2002) maintains the video-game format of Nintendo's *Super Mario Bros.* (it plays on a monitor or as a projection in a gallery setting) but the artist modified the graphics by erasing everything but the cartoon clouds that continually move across the brilliant blue sky.

The title painting, *Cloudless Day*, displays a vivid blue sky and a symmetrical, curved landscape. The composition refers to many aspects of Abstraction, but Ochoa specifically cites the influence of Color Field Painting, characterized by flat fields of color on the canvas. Ochoa's rounded form evokes the visual vocabulary of Ellsworth Kelly, who uses shapes and colors derived from landscape and architecture.

RUBEN OCHOA, *CLOUDLESS DAY*, 2014.
ACRYLIC HOUSE PAINT AND DIRT ON CANVAS, 48 X 84 X 3 IN.
COURTESY OF THE ARTIST AND SUSANNE VIELMETTER
LOS ANGELES PROJECTS.
PHOTO CREDIT: ROBERT WEDEMEYER



ELLSWORTH KELLY, AMERICAN, BORN 1923, *RED ORANGE (INCA)*, 1959.
OIL ON CANVAS, 43 X 18 1/2 IN. WADSWORTH ATHENEUM MUSEUM OF
ART, GIFT OF SUSAN MORSE HILLES, 1992.11 © ELLSWORTH KELLY



MORRIS LOUIS, AMERICAN, 1912-1962, *UNFURLED SERIES: BETA RO*,
1959-60. ACRYLIC ON CANVAS, 103 X 161 1/2 IN. LOS ANGELES
COUNTY MUSEUM OF ART. GIFT OF MR. AND MRS. FREDERICK R.
WEISMAN (M.77.164)
IMAGE © 2014 MUSEUM ASSOCIATES / LACMA. LICENSED BY ART
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Additionally, there are affinities with Morris Louis's series "Unfurleds," made up of large-scale canvases in which irregular, parallel streams of different colors flow diagonally across the lower corners of the paintings. Each center remains a monochrome blank. And finally, instead of making a clean, pristine line between the paint and gravel, Ochoa appears to have carelessly applied the paint to the canvas, allowing it to drip and streak across the top of the landscape rubble. Intentional on the artist's part, Ochoa documented this occurrence in the urban landscape in his earlier work *Kissed in the 90011* (2007), a photograph of a red-painted curb and an invasive ficus tree with its overgrown roots carelessly marked by the painter's indifference. Ochoa likens the gesture to Barnett Newman's "zip" paintings, in which the monochrome canvases contain a single line, like a zipper, that runs vertically down the center of the canvas. Such surprising discoveries in the urban landscape, where Man and Nature collude and collide, provide endless sources of inspiration for Ochoa.

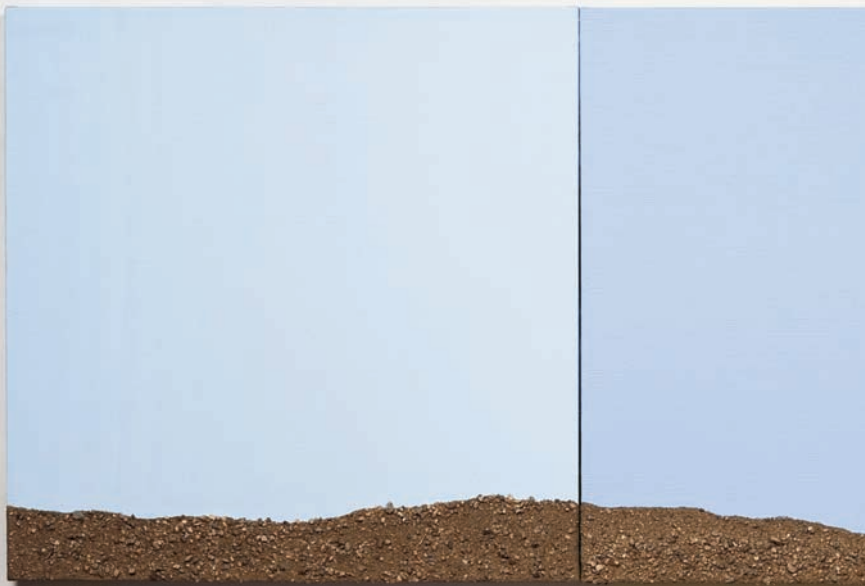
The triptych *Darkening Sky* comprises square canvases depicting a cool tonal trajectory from day to night above a rolling terrain that finally rises on the right panel. Ochoa, in tune with his urban environment, sees the three square forms with breaks in-between as cement sidewalk sections separated by expansion joints.⁴ But the monochrome series of panels also suggests Minimalism, in particular Brice Marden's early diptychs and triptychs featuring muted palettes and references to the natural landscape. Marden describes *Range* (1970) as referring not only to the Western landscape in its "colors, openness, and title," but also, more formally, to the word "range" in terms of the variety of colors across the three panels.⁵ The similarities between the Ochoa and Marden works are notable, but Ochoa's landscapes tap into such a wide range of sources that they ultimately stand alone.

Simultaneously referring to Abstraction and landscape painting, Color Field Painting and California Impressionism, Ruben Ochoa's mixed-media paintings have a direct connection to works within the walls of the Wadsworth Atheneum. Relationships can be seen, and comparisons made, between his pared-down compositions of earth and sky and the museum's renowned collection of Hudson River School landscapes and Abstract paintings. Ochoa's new body of work maintains a direct reference to his best known critical work in sculpture and installation through his use of California dirt, as in *Extruded Masses* (2013), precariously stacked geometric, shaped dirt that looms large enough to remind the viewer of his fragility in relation to space. With only commercial house paint, sand, and gravel, the artist subverts the history of California landscape painting. The early-twentieth-century idealized vision of the natural landscape has been stripped away by Ochoa and replaced by a twenty-first-century authentic version of the built environment based in social abstraction.

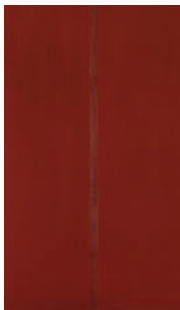
PATRICIA HICKSON

Emily Hall Tremain Curator of Contemporary Art

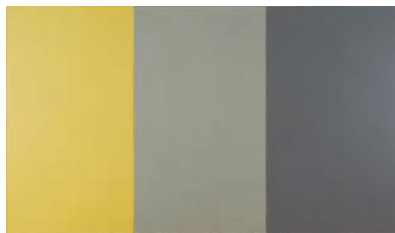
RUBEN OCHOA, *DARKENING SKY*, 2014.
ACRYLIC HOUSE PAINT AND DIRT ON CANVAS, 48 X 144 X 3 IN.
COURTESY OF THE ARTIST AND SUSANNE VIELMETTER LOS ANGELES
PROJECTS. PHOTO CREDIT: ROBERT WEDEMEYER



RUBEN OCHOA, *KISSED IN THE 90011*, 2007.
C-PRINT IN CUSTOM WENGE FRAME, 40 X 50 IN.
COURTESY OF THE ARTIST AND SUSANNE VIELMETTER
LOS ANGELES PROJECTS



BARNETT NEWMAN, AMERICAN, 1905–1970, *ONEMENT II*, 1948. OIL
ON CANVAS, 60 X 36 IN. WADSWORTH ATHENEUM MUSEUM OF ART.
GIFT OF TONY SMITH, 1967.14
© 2014 THE BARNETT NEWMAN FOUNDATION, NEW YORK / ARTISTS
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BRICE MARDEN, AMERICAN, BORN 1938, *RANGE*, 1970. BEESWAX AND OIL ON CANVAS, 60 1/2 × 105 IN. DES MOINES ART CENTER.

PURCHASED WITH FUNDS FROM THE COFFIN FINE ARTS TRUST; NATHAN EMORY COFFIN COLLECTION OF THE DES MOINES ART CENTER, 1996.1

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RUBEN OCHOA

EDUCATION

2003 MFA, University of California, Irvine
1997 BFA, Otis College of Art and Design,
Los Angeles

1996 Parsons School of Art and Design, New York

SELECTED SOLO EXHIBITIONS

2014 *MATRIX 169: Cloudless Day*, Wadsworth
Atheneum Museum of Art, Hartford, CT

2011 *Cores and Cutouts*, Locust Projects,
Miami, FL

2010 *Ruben Ochoa*, Museum of Contemporary
Art, San Diego, CA

2009 *Crooked Under the Weight*, Site Santa Fe,
Santa Fe, NM
What if Walls Created Spaces, Charles H.
Scott Gallery at Emily Carr University,
Vancouver, B.C. Canada

2007 *Clastic Rupture*, Hallwalls Contemporary
Arts Center, Buffalo, NY

2006 *Extracted*, LA><ART, Los Angeles, CA

2005 *Borrowed Ladders*, ESL I Esthetics as a
Second Language, Los Angeles, CA

2004 *Greyscale*, Voz Alta Projects, San Diego, CA

SELECTED GROUP EXHIBITIONS

2013 *Nasher XCHANGE*, Nasher Sculpture Center,
Dallas, TX
Reverberate, Huntington Beach Art Center,
Huntington Beach, CA
Duet: Ruben Ochoa and B.J. Vogt, Duet,
St. Louis, MO

2012 *Lost Line*, Los Angeles County Museum of
Art, Los Angeles, CA
Haubrok Collection - No Desaster,
Sammlung Falckenberg, Hamburg, Germany

2011 *FGAP @ Venice*, Collateral Event of the
54th International Art Exhibition- La
Biennale di Venezia, Palazzo Papadopoli,
Venice, Italy
Beta-Space: Kevin Appel and Ruben Ochoa,
San Jose Museum of Art, San Jose, CA

2010 *The Artist's Museum: Los Angeles Artists
1980-2010*, Museum of Contemporary Art,
Los Angeles, CA
Future Generation Art Prize,
PinchukArtCentre, Kiev, Ukraine
Invisible City, Instituto Cervantes,
Madrid, Spain
Between Here and There, Miami Art
Museum, Miami, Florida

2008 *Whitney Biennial*, Whitney Museum of
American Art, New York, NY
Phantom Sightings, Los Angeles County
Museum of Art, Los Angeles, CA
*From and About Place: Art from Los
Angeles*, The Center for Contemporary Arts,
Tel Aviv, Israel

It's All About Sculpture, Haubrok
Foundation, Berlin, Germany

2007 *Viva Mexico!* Zachęta National Gallery of
Art, Warsaw, Poland

Multifaceted Lens, Minnesota Center for
Photography, Minneapolis, MN

2006 *Mexicali Biennial*, La Casa de la Tia Tina,
Mexicali, Mexico
*An Image Bank for Everyday Revolutionary
Life*, REDCAT, Los Angeles, CA

2005 *passerby*, Vox Populi, Philadelphia, PA
Borderless Dreams, Oceanside Museum of
Art, Oceanside, CA

2004 *California Biennial*, Orange County Museum
of Art, Newport Beach, CA

Born in Oceanside, California, 1974
Lives and works in Los Angeles, California

SELECTED PUBLIC PROJECTS

- 2006-07 *Fwy Wall Extraction*, 10 fwy eastbound below Soto St and Marengo Blvd intersection, Los Angeles, CA
- 2006 *Disrup, LA*><ART Billboard Project, La Cienega Blvd between Venice and Washington, Los Angeles, CA
- 2001-05 *CLASS: C*, mobile artist space (in the back of my 1985 Chevy Van) featuring over 75 artists, curators, and collaborators throughout Southern California

SELECTED GRANTS AND AWARDS

- 2013 California Community Foundation: Getty Fellow, Mid-Career Artist
- 2012 The Santo Foundation 2012 Individual Artist Award
- 2010 The Durfee Foundation: Artists' Resource for Completion Grant
- 2008 John Simon Guggenheim Memorial Foundation Fellowship
Center for Cultural Innovation (CCI)
Investing in Artist Grant
Los Angeles County Museum of Art AHAN Award (Art Here And Now)
- 2006 Renew Media Rockefeller Foundation Fellowship
- 2005 Creative Capital Foundation: Visual Arts Grant
- 2004 California Community Foundation: Emerging Artist Fellowship
The Durfee Foundation: Artists' Resource for Completion Grant

RESIDENCIES

- 2004 Nimoy Foundation, California Biennial, Orange County Museum of Art: Artist-in-Residence
- 2007 International Studio and Curatorial Program Residency (ISCP-NYC), August–November

PUBLIC COLLECTIONS

- Albright–Knox Art Gallery, Buffalo, NY
Hammer Museum at UCLA, Los Angeles, CA
Los Angeles County Museum of Art, Los Angeles, CA
Pérez Art Museum Miami, Miami, FL
Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles, CA
- Museum of Contemporary Art, San Diego, CA
Orange County Museum of Art, Newport Beach, CA
Phoenix Art Museum, Phoenix, AZ
Whitney Museum of American Art, New York, NY

WORKS IN THE EXHIBITION

All works courtesy of the artist and
Susanne Vielmetter Los Angeles Projects

Morning Fog, 2014

Acrylic house paint and dirt on canvas
66 x 180 x 3 in.

Cloudless Day, 2014

Acrylic house paint and dirt on canvas
48 x 84 x 3 in.

Darkening Sky, 2014

Acrylic house paint and dirt on canvas
48 x 144 x 3 in.

ARTIST TALK

MATRIX Gallery Talk

Ruben Ochoa

Thursday, June 5

6 pm

Ochoa will discuss his MATRIX project *Cloudless Day*
in the Eleanor H. Bunce Gallery.

GALLERY TALK

Patricia Hickson

Thursday, August 14

12 pm

Meet in Main Lobby, Free with museum admission

Join Patricia Hickson, Emily Hall Tremaine Curator of
Contemporary Art, for an introduction to the work
of MATRIX 169 artist Ruben Ochoa.

MATRIX 169 is supported by the National Endowment for
the Arts, a federal agency.

The MATRIX program is also supported in part by the
current and founding members of the Wadsworth
Atheneum Museum of Art's Contemporary Coalition.

Support for the Wadsworth Atheneum is provided in part by
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and the Connecticut Department of Economic and
Community Development Office of the Arts, which also
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Arts, a federal agency.



Wadsworth Atheneum
Museum of Art

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Hartford, Connecticut 06103
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www.thewadsworth.org



¹ Trinie Dalton, "Ruben Ochoa," *2008 Whitney Biennial*. New York: Whitney Museum of American Art, 2008; p. 191.

² "Ruben Ochoa: Dislocated Masses," November 9 - December 21, 2013. Exhibition Press Release, Susanne Vielmetter Los Angeles Projects, 2013. See www.vielmetter.com.

³ Ruben Ochoa, email correspondence with the author, 13 May 2014.

⁴ Ruben Ochoa, telephone conversation with the author, 3 May 2014.

⁵ I. Michael Danoff citing Brice Marden in *An Uncommon Vision: The Des Moines Art Center*. Des Moines, Iowa: The Des Moines Art Center, 1998; p. 180.