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Preserving Beauty

Rye's Jorge Otero-Pailos is an internationally renowned artist and preservationist known for his daring installations that combine history, design, and destruction. **BY PAUL ADLER**



(Top): *The Ethics of Dust* at Westminster Hall, by Jorge Otero-Pailos, 2016. An Artangel commission.

For Jorge Otero-Pailos, beauty is found in the most unlikely places. The director and professor of Historic Preservation at Columbia University as well as an artist and preservationist, Otero-Pailos' artwork and installations combine sound and sculpture to tell the stories of dust, demolished buildings, ruins, and environmental pollution. Even Otero-Pailos' home in Rye is another instance in which something precious is plucked from what seems to others like wreckage.

"We moved to Westchester three and a half years ago," recalls Otero-Pailos. "We bought a little Tudor in Rye, one of these houses that was sold to us as a tear-down and we said, 'No way are we tearing down this jewel.' So we made it into a beautiful home for us and our kids."

When it comes to his art — which has been exhibited from Brussels to London to Hong Kong in the past year alone — Otero-Pailos takes a similarly singular stance, enmeshing his pedagogy at Columbia and passion for architecture with his pieces. "A lot of my work is really informed by the methods of re-

searching archival material," explains Otero-Pailos. "When a historian goes through all that material, the expression of that work goes into a book. For me, the expression of all that research goes into an artwork."

In fact, Otero-Pailos has a very long history in architecture. He is known for helping found Puerto Rico's New School of Architecture, in 1995, which remains a respected institution to this day. "Starting the school of architecture was a wonderful, once-in-a-lifetime opportunity," says Otero-Pailos, who also holds a Ph.D. in architecture from MIT as well as a Masters of Architecture from Cornell University. "Intellectually, it felt like a new kind of education was possible in which architects as cultural producers could shape the future of the island, as crazy as that sounds."

Otero-Pailos is also known for establishing the scholarly preservation journal, *Future Anterior*. However, through it all, art has remained Otero-Pailos' primary passion. "I love texts and to write as well, but I just feel art is, in a strange way, more open and accessible to everyone," shares Otero-Pailos. "It has many more points of entry and I like to make works that al-

PHOTO BY WILLECKERSLEY



Installation view of *Watershed Moment*, a site-specific art commission located in the historic pool building of Lyndhurst Mansion in Tarrytown.

PHOTO BY OTERO PAILOS STUDIO; COURTESY OF THE ARTIST, THE NATIONAL TRUST FOR HISTORIC PRESERVATION, AND SAPAR CONTEMPORARY

low for that, so someone who doesn't know anything about my work or about the research that goes into it can still enjoy its beauty and take something away from it."

Otero-Pailos' most acclaimed series of works is likely his *Ethics of Dust*, which has brought him to such locations as Venice's Doge's Palace and London's Westminster Hall in order to create works that fuse design and history with dirt and disintegration. Many of these pieces involve large latex casts of the buildings' exteriors that capture surface pollutants, including dust and grime.

"All of a sudden, I was looking at buildings not simply as beautiful artworks but as long-term environmental sensors that are actually out there in the weather recording information, and we just don't really have the ability to decode it," explains Otero-Pailos regarding *Ethics of Dust*. "So, through these artworks, I am now trying to teach my students how to understand the code that is imprinted on buildings, because it can tell us so much about the history of the environment."

In fact, Otero-Pailos recently brought one of these acclaimed works to the county he calls home. Tarrytown's Lyndhurst Mansion hosted a two-year-long, site-specific art installation by Otero-Pailos, titled *Watershed Moment*, in 2020 and 2021. "That piece is very simply a way, like all my *Ethics of Dust* pieces, of taking you into a grand space that also serves as

a window into an even larger landscape, which in this case is the whole New York watershed, the questions of how this water got here and where it came from, and the Hudson River School of painters," notes Otero-Pailos.

Yet, whether he is teaching, writing books, or living in Italy as part of the

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2021-22 American Academy in Rome Residency in the visual arts (as he is currently), the onus of Otero-Pailos' output remains compassion. "My work always comes from the position of trying to save something or care for something rather than use up something or just put another thing out there," says Otero-Pailos thoughtfully. "I think art can teach us a lot about how to care for the world; a way of being that starts from a position that we are, from the beginning, dependent on a world that cares for us but in the end is also dependent upon us. I think the world has cared a lot for us in the past, and it's now our turn to care a bit for it." **w**