

Miguel Palma Doesn't Trust the Images

by [Kathleen Massara](#)



At [Nicholas Robinson Gallery](#), [Miguel Palma](#)'s gigantic mixed-media installation holds court to the left of the entrance. It's a curious bricolage of plastic items mounted on a rotating surface, and features toys of a bygone era. Perhaps "toys" is the wrong word, though, because the objects on display are both absurd and, ultimately, menacing. A plastic soldier in fatigues holds a radioactive-yellow level, an astronaut floats above a skeleton, a prisoner stares at a translucent ball with a snake inside, row houses balance on meager supports, and Superwoman grasps two bombs as a fighter jet is suspended in flight overhead. The disk turns slowly, taking about an hour per revolution.

There's a surveillance camera mounted on the fighter jet filming the scene below. Though there aren't any signs guiding you, head for the basement; here you'll find the video projected on a lone wall. Down there, Palma turns to me and says that these images are more real than the terraformed piece in the entrance. He begins to lose the thread of his thoughts, and, in a moment of inspiration, waves his hands in the air, referring to the sculpture as "this tutti-frutti thing."

Palma was five years old when Neil Armstrong took his "small step" on the moon, and the gallery contains the artist's neatly arranged collections from this era of space exploration, when great leaps in technology made for a vast array of militarized boys' toys. In another corner a large yellow tube is fixed to a screen, inches away from the nose of a model of an Airbus A380 (which has been enthusiastically referred to as "The Mother of All Airplanes!"). At irregular intervals the vacuum tube sucks air through the screen, creating a dusty corona at its center while the plane rotates 360 degrees.

In an era of expansive technological gains and dwindling engineering expertise, there is a fraught relationship between these mechanized objects and the people for whom they are purportedly created. There is also an obvious gap between knowledge and use; for instance, the Airbus can hold over 600 passengers, most of whom have absolutely no idea how it works. Palma challenges our era of specialization with his incessant curiosity about technology. In the early 90s, he worked with a team of engineers to build a car, viewing it as "a challenge." "I want to learn, to discover," Palma said, "to be a pioneer, which is a romantic way of viewing it, I know. That's the way I started working in the beginning."

Baudrillard wrote that the "ecstasy of information" was simulation; the image becomes more real than the experience. Palma's [*In Image We Trust*](#) (through February 12) presents the audience with this modern quandary, where we are spectators rather than participants in modern life, rapidly consuming the advances in science and engineering without thinking about the serious repercussions of our passivity.

(photo credit: Nicholas Robinson Gallery)

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