

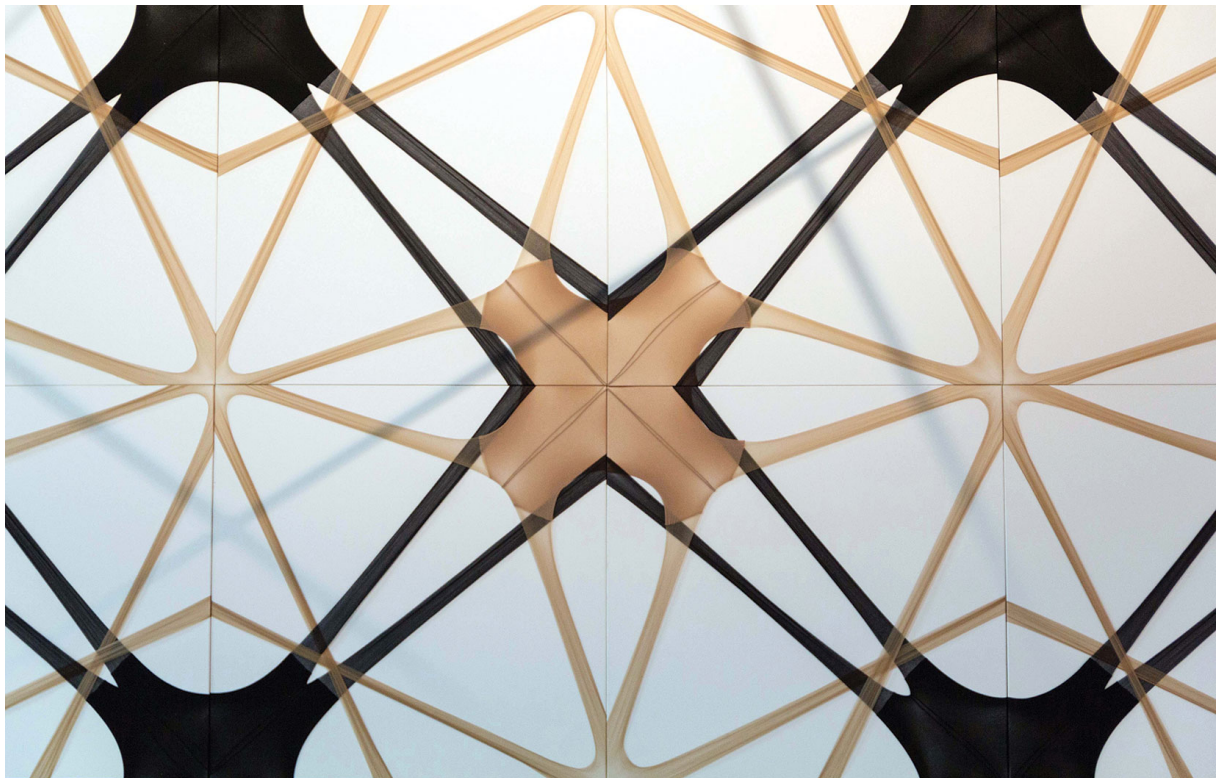


## Creating a Way Back: A Conversation with Martin Soto Climent

December 1, 2018 by [Elizabeth Fullerton](#)

Using found objects such as pantyhose, purses, bras, beer cans, and shoes, Mexican artist Martin Soto Climent creates sensual, anthropomorphic sculptures with minimal intervention. Easily dismantled (with the objects returned to their original state), these poetic, continually evolving juxtapositions raise questions about ephemerality, consumption, destruction, and desire. By temporarily transforming objects, Soto Climent endows them with new, even oppositional meanings. Flat Venetian blinds are twisted into lively three-dimensional forms

that recall the whirling and stamping of Flamenco dancers; while defunct windshields become delicate butterfly wings, and upside-down paper bags take on the solidity of blocks to form miniature cityscapes. Tights, with their intimate, gendered physical associations, have been a favored medium for Soto Climent. His dramatic installation *Frenetic Gossamer* (2009–ongoing), exhibited in 2016 at Palais de Tokyo in Paris, consisted of a dynamic lattice made of tights stretched diagonally across a large space to evoke darting arrows. High-heeled shoes anchoring the “legs” combined with the taut, airborne crotches to imbue the whole with an erotic frisson recalling the fetishistic explorations of Surrealism.



*Frenetic Gossamer*, 2009–ongoing. Mixed media, view of installation at the Palais de Tokyo, Paris. Photo: Antoine Aphenbero, Courtesy the artist, T293, Rome, Karma International, Zurich, Michael Benevento, Los Angeles, and Proyectos Monclova, Mexico City

**Elizabeth Fullerton: The theme of desire threads through your work, both in terms of erotic physical desire and the desire that drives capitalist consumer culture.**

**Martin Soto Climent:** That’s exactly the key concept for many of my pieces. I treat a broad range of desire, from the essential aspect of being human, which is in a way more animal, to the whole process of being in a complex society, which is all about creating desires in order to consume things and keep the economy going. Art makes sense when it opens a path for new possibilities of understanding the world. To do that, we have to stay close to our origins, so we cannot forget that we are animals.

**EF: Your sculptures, which inherently reference the body, are erotic without crossing the line into pornography. You make tactile arrangements of soft leather on wood, which resemble the folds and puckering of female genitalia, underwear sculptures straddling beer bottles as if they were thighs, and stretched tights that suggest bondage or a second skin.**

**MSC:** With pornography, it’s just the object; it’s obvious. Eroticism is not obvious. We can see a stone or the curve of a tree and feel a sexual impulse for something that is not human or

even alive. Eroticism moves you from inside, from the stomach, from the sex, and that's why it is so uncomfortable. For me, pornography is sad because it turns sex into merchandise.



*Frenetic Gossamer*, 2009–ongoing. Mixed media, view of installation at the Palais de Tokyo, Paris. Photo: Antoine Aphenbero, Courtesy the artist, T293, Rome, Karma International, Zurich, Michael Benevento, Los Angeles, and Proyectos Monclova, Mexico City

**EF: For the first 10 years of your practice you made sculptures by painstakingly folding, twisting, and bending materials to assign them new forms, yet the impermanence of those transformations was fundamental. Is this minimal approach grounded in a philosophical belief?**

**MSC:** In my opinion, art has to conceive other ways to build society, to create reality. The current system is based on rules that are damaging our planet—we are using, exploiting, and consuming everything. My way was to show that we can transform without damaging, and I was doing it in a very Mexican way. It was a duality, conceiving of life and death as the same thing. Life is about an instant. I can take window blinds and fold them, and for an instant, they exist as objects totally dislocated from their original function and shape. Following the natural possibilities of the object, I can express something else. And then, once the message is communicated, you can rehang the blinds in the window and they still work. It's about creating the piece and creating the way back.

**EF: How has your insistence on ephemerality squared with market demands?**

**MSC:** In a world that understands art as a product, it was hard at the beginning—people

wanted to have that object—but, for me, it was all about the movement that existed in Mexico City, with one blind at a certain moment. I cannot do it again; I do not have the same blind, and even if I bought the same blind, it wouldn't happen because maybe the mood is not the same. It was very important to show that it's not about products, but about life and energy. That's how I started developing all of my object series, always creating references to the body, to sensuality, to the female energy inside me. We're all a combination of male and female. You fold the object in a very careful way so that you will not damage it and you let it be something.



*Frenetic Gossamer*, 2009–ongoing. View of performance at Frieze Projects London. Photo: Lewis Ronald, Courtesy the artist and T293, Rome

**EF: Tights have been a recurrent motif in your work. In your abstract works on canvas, they have taken the place of pigment; you have exploited their fleshy materiality in your sculptures by stuffing them and wrapping them around objects; and you have energized whole rooms with sexual tension by stretching them between walls to embrace the void.**

**MSC:** The tights on canvas were my way of creating a painting; if I apply oil on top of a canvas, that canvas cannot go back. I was thinking that one of the main themes of Western painting is the portrait, with its individuality, and then there is also the issue of eroticism about the naked body and recovering our human scale. So, playing with the body as a reference, the tights were perfect. I used the canvas as a record of a movement, of stretching the tights, but you can take the tights away and wear them and the canvas is still pristine.

**EF: So you eschewed glue, screws, tacks, or anything that would mark your work?**

**MSC:** I didn't use any element that would force the object to be what I wanted it to be. It was not about what I wanted; it was about the possibilities of the object's nature. This can be applied to many things, including educational systems or ecological systems. I do it with a shoe, for instance, because that's what I have in front of me, but it's a whole philosophy about how you approach life. We also have to consider that I didn't have any money when I started

these things; maybe I would have been really happy casting bronzes, but I couldn't even afford to buy plasticine in the beginning.



*Frenetic Gossamer*, 2009–ongoing. Mixed media, view of installation at the Palais de Tokyo, Paris. Photo: Antoine Aphenbero, Courtesy the artist, T293, Rome, Karma International, Zurich, Michael Benevento, Los Angeles, and Proyectos Monclova, Mexico City

**EF: Your sculptural assemblages also encompass performative elements. In 2016, you created a version of *Frenetic Gossamer* for Frieze Projects in London in which acrobats animated the spaces between and inside the stretched tights.**

**MSC:** The reading of my pieces has always been very performative. I want my foldings to exist as a moment and disappear.

**EF: Your work shares affinities with Arte Povera, Minimalism, and even Surrealism. Did those movements inspire you?**

**MSC:** It was my reality. I was truly poor, more Povera than Povera. You have to learn to take from everything. I try to show the minimum, but the minimum as it works in nature because nature is the best teacher of economy—nothing is lost or left over. I turned Minimalism into a poor way by making a mix of Povera sexy erotic surreal Minimalism.

I believe Surrealism is maybe the most interesting movement of the 20th century. It's the moment when modernity collapsed. We arrived on top, but there was nothing on the other side. There are still wars and sickness. In my opinion, the art of the 20th century is about destruction, and that's why Picasso is the most important painter—he destroyed the form, the shape, the idea. But it has to be over, because we cannot destroy everything for the next thousand years. Now, it has to be about how we start building again. We have to create, to renovate.

**EF: What is the role of improvisation in your process?**

**MSC:** Nothing is predetermined. For many years, I never shipped a box. It was me traveling, melting into a place, touching base. There was an ethical consciousness about it. It was me arriving in a city, walking around, trying to understand its logic, its people, its frequency. In 2009, I arrived in Naples for “Laberintome,” my second show at T293; and for two months, I just collected things and made notes. Every new element that I found in the street—a mirror, panties, trousers, pillows—changed the whole equation. Everything was shifting until the very end, and I installed the show in one night.



Installation view of “Laberintome,” 2009 at T293, Naples. Photo: Danilo Donzelli, Courtesy the artist and T293, Rome

**EF: Five years ago, your work underwent a major shift with “The Contemporary Comedy” project, for which you are creating an extensive cast of artist characters, drawing on the traditions of the Commedia dell’arte. Each of these alter egos has a distinct identity and style: one manipulates leather, another works with graffiti, another calligraphy. What triggered the change?**

**MSC:** For many years, I was suffering because I was determined to work under the logic of not damaging. I was not painting, I was not showing my drawings, and I was holding back many aspects of myself. After 10 years, I arrived at the point where it was not possible to fold more. I could keep folding the same shoe, but then it turns into a formula. I had to address the same concept, but from a different angle. So, everything changed. It was a process of liberation, of opening myself up, but at the same time trying to keep the same kind of responsibility.

**EF: Your 2014 exhibition “Luster Butterfly” at T293 in Rome marked the debut of works by these artist personae, who are both real and fictitious, alongside your own pieces as Martin Soto Climent. How did that work in practice?**

**MSC:** It was like a group show. I’m one of them, just a little bit more real than the others. There was John Brown from New York, who makes sculptures from cans with plasticine faces, and the Mexican graffiti artist Jesus Martinez, who did graffiti on top of my blinds, which I then folded. It was about artists collaborating. It was confusing for galleries, and more confusing for collectors, but you have to do art, not satisfy collectors or galleries.



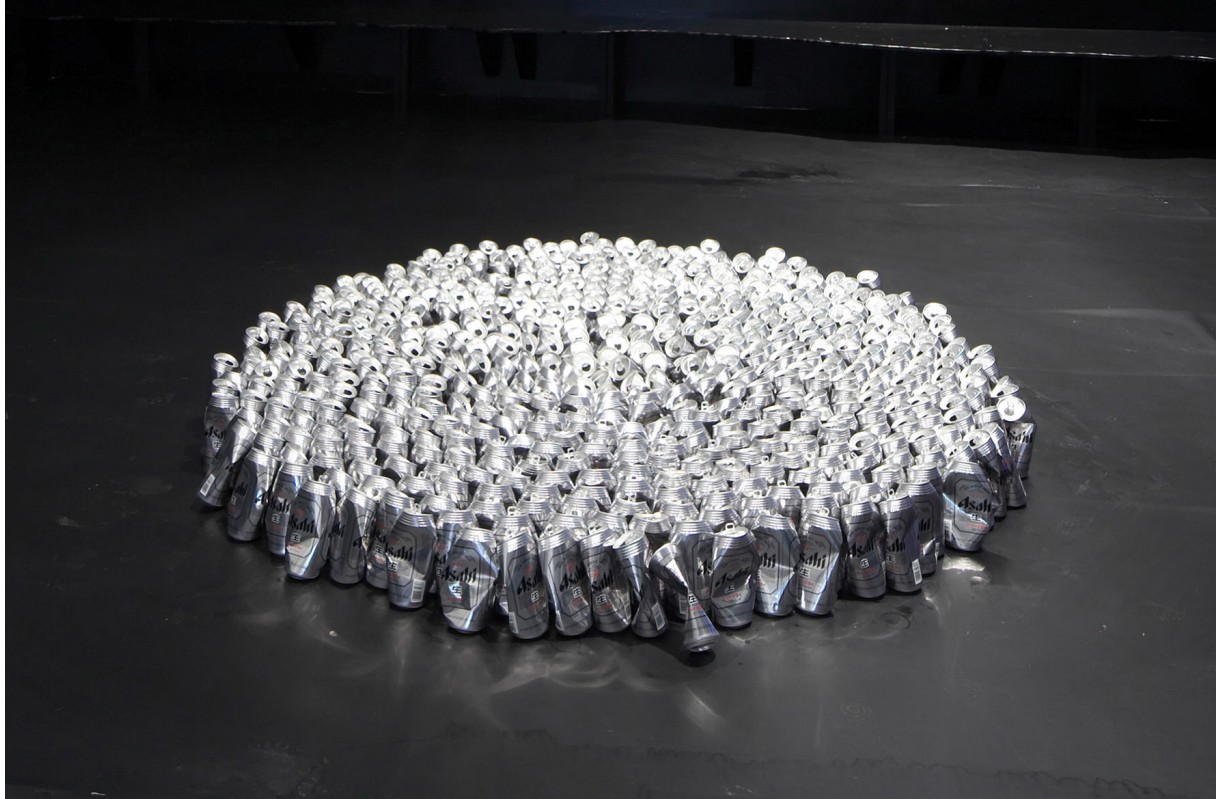
*John Brown: Egg, 2015. Eggshell, plasticine, and glass eye, 2 x 2.5 x 3 in. Photo: Andres Ramirez, Courtesy the artist and Michael Benevento, Los Angeles*

**EF: The works by your invented artists Martinez and Brown extend the discourse of your own sculptures around disposability, temporality, and reuse. In particular, Brown’s beer cans echo your *Impulsive Chorus (Asahi)* (2009), which features a crowd of crumpled beer cans that appear to lurch and sing drunkenly.**

**MSC:** In the end, it’s just me in a theatrical play. I’m doing a kind of Greek comedy with characters, putting on a mask and a persona because I want to communicate an idea that is more complex than what I can say just by folding something. At the end of the show, there were windshields covered in gold, broken, like wings. I used the butterfly because it’s a symbol of metamorphosis and I’m turning into something else.

**EF: How do you reconcile the permanent interventions by your artists with your philosophy of not damaging?**

**MSC:** In a way, it's not me. I'm doing it under another name, so I keep my integrity as a guy who doesn't damage. I understand these pieces as references that I need to build the character. I still try to keep the resources low. I'm not creating a career for each one of these artists.



*Impulsive Chorus (Asahi)*, 2009. Approximately 1000 beer cans, installation view. Photo: Courtesy the artist and T293, Rome

**EF: Are the artists aspects of you, or are they people in a fantasy who represent various genres that you want to explore?**

**MSC:** That's a really good question. Some of them make art that I actually don't want to exist in the world. Some of them are impossible for me to avoid because they make up a piece of the puzzle that I need, yet it's also me because, of course, I conceived the puzzle.

**EF: Are there places for your own poetic gestures within the cacophony of invented artists' voices?**

**MSC:** I still do those gestures, but I also have to protect them. The first time one of my shoe sculptures was sold at Art Basel, I didn't know what it meant. Then I thought, "Oh no, I need those shoes; I folded them for that piece, but they were also part of this other piece." It's like a vocabulary, and every object is linked. I realize that I am diluting the essence, the real honest part of my work, because the market just consumes. In order to keep that part safe, I built an army of artist characters, but they are also building a logic because it's a story. One artist is related to the other, they influence each other, and all of them are part of a big vision of art that I'm creating.





*Revoloteo #3*, 2014. Acrylic on Venetian blinds, approx. 28.375 x 37.375 x 23.625 in. Photo: Roberto Apa, Courtesy the artist and T293, Rome

**EF: The notion of folding is innate to your practice, whether literally or in the sense of encompassing and enclosing ideas. Is your comedy of artists connected conceptually to the physically folded work?**

**MSC:** Absolutely. In a few years, I hope to arrive at enough material to present a clearer picture of the project as a whole. I'm going to drive the story toward a climax, because I understand my folding as a moment of climax that can then disappear. So, I'm going to fold history into what I want it to be for a moment and then, whoosh, let it go. That's why it's so important that I am the one who paints with Chinese ink or oil, who does sculpture. It's my hand, my spirit, as opposed to the conceptual artist who has a very clever idea and then has a team of people to produce it.

**EF: Your show “Temazcal” seemed to shift toward mysticism and ritual objects. Sculptures and slide projections centered on a shaman called Don Pedro who conducts purification and birthing ceremonies involving the *temazcal*, a type of pre-Hispanic sweat lodge.**

**MSC:** It's opening a more spiritual aspect in my work. I needed an element in my story about humility, and the life of Don Pedro is humble. The temazcal is like pure alchemy, a sublimation of fire, earth, water, and air happening in the moment.

**EF:** You presented a sparse collection of natural objects on gold-painted shelves—a gnarled cactus, cascading feathers, a row of charred, arrow-like sticks. Some were enclosed like precious relics in glass cases, others, such as a fragment of snakeskin and torn tights, were framed by burnt wood.

**MSC:** It was a very minimal show. The *temazcal* inspired me to create a new artist who manipulates works in a different way, so the objects are burned or cooked. They're symbols—something very humble, very honest, that comes from the earth. We're living in a moment when the U.S. President wants to build a wall against Mexico, but he doesn't know what Mexico is. Most of what his world means is ego, money, and destroying resources, so I wanted to show that Mexico is the opposite of these things and to give it dignity.



*Flechazos*, 2018. Charred wood, thorns, wood plinth, and acrylic, 23.5 x 28.25 x 9 in. Photo: Marten Elder, Courtesy the artist and Michael Benevento, Los Angeles

**EF:** Where does this journey take you?

**MSC:** The *temazcal* is another kind of metamorphosis for me, like the butterfly, but now it extends into the elements of the planet. I have a list of new characters that I want to develop, and they are going to take on the essence of the planet.

*Elizabeth Fullerton is a critic and writer based in London.*